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EAT C-Dur
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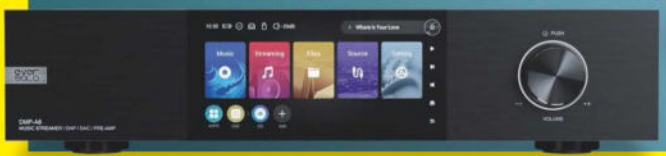
Luxman L-509Z
The integrated with retro spirit

Rotel Michi P5 S2
Battleship DAC/preamplifier

Eversolo DMP-A8
High-value, high-tech streamer



PLUS...
PS Audio AirLens,
Goldring Ethos SE,
Violectric DHA V226,
Top 20 concept albums, and more...

- **OPINION** 12 pages of letters and comment
- **VINYL RELEASE** Kate Bush's *Sensual World* on 180g
- **CLASSICAL COMPANION** Copland's *Appalachian Spring*
- **STUDIO TOURS** The Hideout, Las Vegas
- **SHOW BLOG** We visit Oslo's Hi-Fi Show '24
- **READERS' CLASSIFIEDS** More hi-fi bargains galore

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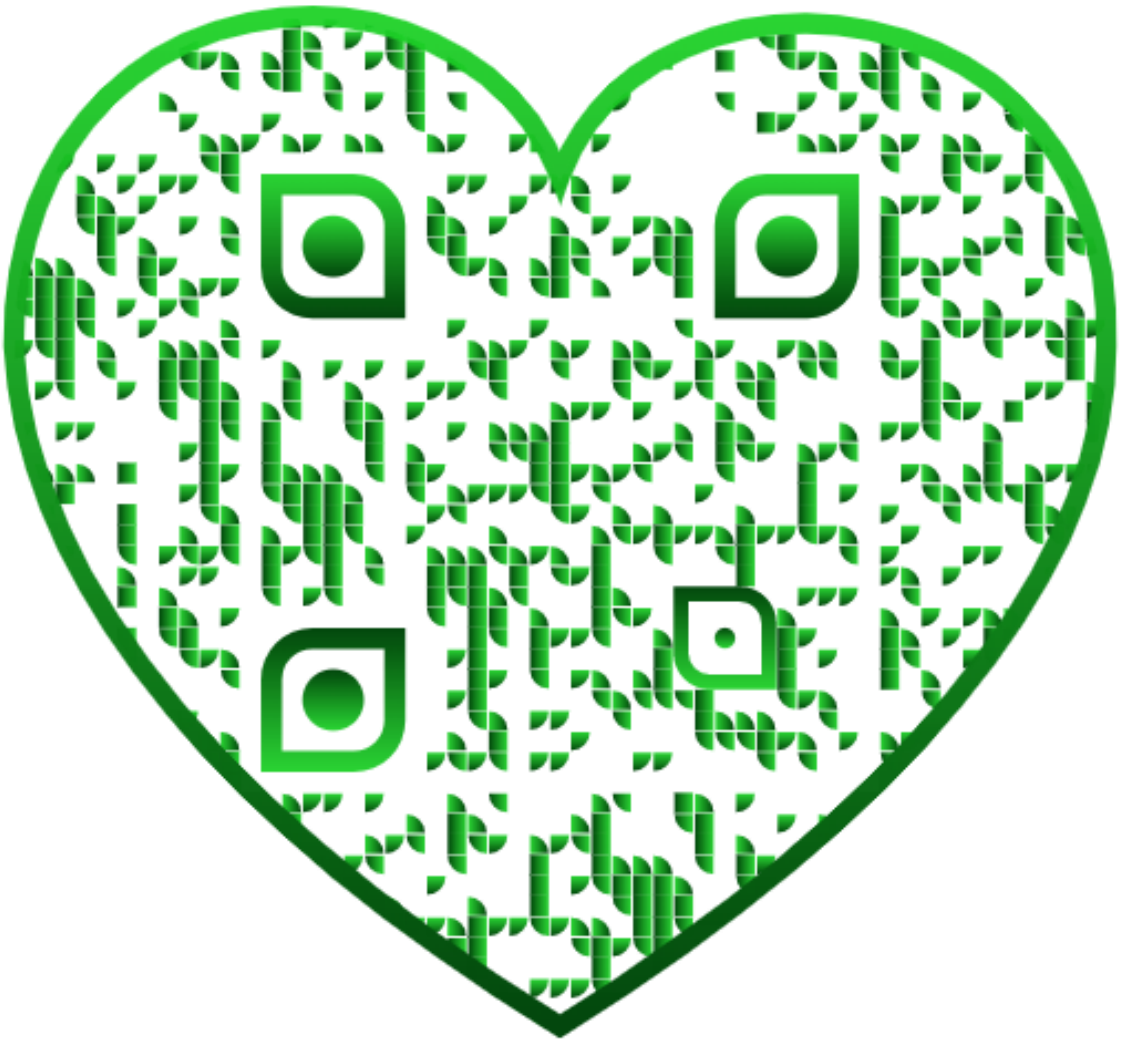

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- Andrew Everard, Lab: Paul Miller, hi-fi news

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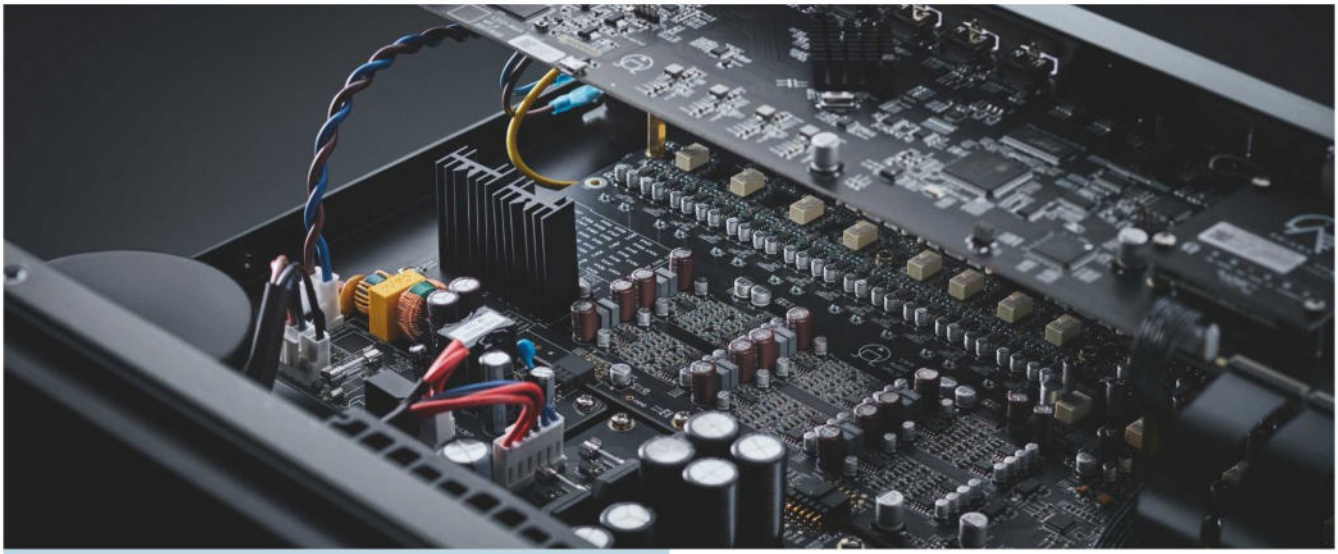

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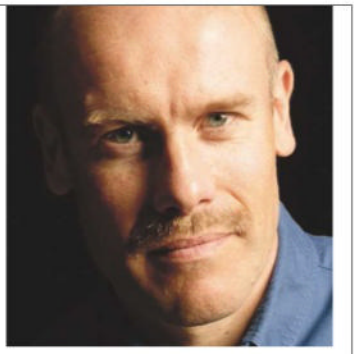
RIGHT: Silver coils and tickled-up magnets distinguish the new SE version of Goldring's flagship Ethos MC. Our exclusive review gets into the groove on p56

BELOW: Not to scale, PS Audio's new AirLens streamer includes an I²S/HDMI link to the partnering DirectStream DAC MK2. See p48

MUSIC: Passion through a cinematic lens, ABC's *The Lexicon Of Love* is our Vinyl Icon (p82), while Steve Sutherland goes transcendental as Kate Bush's *The Sensual World* reappears on 180g (p80)

RIGHT: *HFN* is the UK's representative of EISA's Hi-Fi Expert Group. Editor Paul Miller took over as EISA's President in June 2016 and was re-elected in 2021



Once in a blue moon we alight upon a product whose BOM (bill of materials), feature set and performance fully belies its price tag. Examples from hi-fi history include the universal disc players from Oppo, its BDP-95EU [*HFN* May '12], BDP-105EU [*HFN* Jan '13] and UDP-205 [*HFN* Jul '17] paving the way for the brand's game-changing planar magnetic headphones.

Close inspection suggested it was impossible to even *build* these players for the asking price. Most competing players looked positively lightweight in comparison and Oppo was sorely missed after it opted out of audio to focus its attention on its smartphone empire.

Oppo's innovative BDP-95EU was the first 'affordable' audio product to employ two ESS Sabre DACs when even the most 'high-end' of digital separates were using just one of these eight-channel chips. This was before the Silicon Valley-based DAC supremo, ESS, came to monopolise the hi-fi roost.

Fellow chip innovator, Asahi Kasei Microdevices (AKM), was put on the back foot following the devastating 2020 fire at its plant in Japan, but is returning with a refreshed range of its 'Velvet Sound/Verita' digital audio ICs. And new kid on the block, Eversolo, is making very good use of AKM's 'dynamic duo' – the AK4191EQ delta-sigma modulator and partnering AK4499EXEQ DAC. Eversolo's DMP-A8 network-attached DAC/preamp is reviewed on p68 and while it's not quite an 'Oppo battleship' it is still remarkably well-specified for the price.

The 'two-chip' DAC format is unusual and we need to look back to 1991 and Philips' famous DAC7 chipset for something similar. The DAC7 combined Philips' SAA7350 noise-shaper with the TDA1547 bit-converter. It was a true 1-bit solution and while AKM's AK4191/AK4499 duo look to 'communicate' via a 7-bit PWM bitstream, there are still parallels in this dual-chip approach. More products using AKM's two-part DAC solution will undoubtedly follow, and we will be hot on their heels!

> 'New kid, Eversolo, is making good use of AKM's two-chip DAC'

PAUL MILLER GROUP EDITOR

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Peter Quantrill has been writing about music for magazines and record labels for 30 years. He is *HFN*'s master of the classics

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is a long-serving contributor, luxury goods writer and champion for the renaissance in valves and reel-to-reel tape

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STEVE SUTHERLAND
worked on *Melody Maker* and then edited *NME* from 1992-2000, the Britpop years. Steve brings a unique slant to our Vinyl Release pages

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D'Agostino revamp

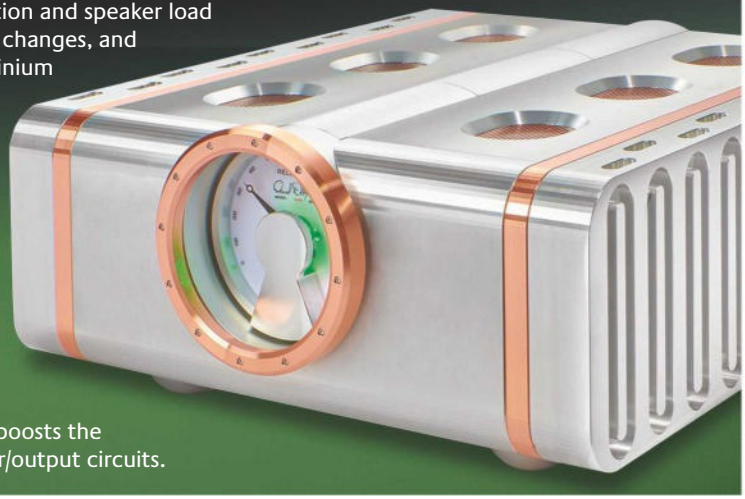
FLAGSHIP RELENTLESS MONO AMP RECEIVES 'EPIC' UPGRADE, AND BIRTHS NEW 'BABY BROTHER' STILL RATED AT 800W...

High-end amplifier marque D'Agostino Master Audio Systems has launched a successor to its Relentless monoblock [*HFN* Mar '20] – two offspring, in fact. Both the Relentless Epic 1600 Mono (£XXX,xxx) and the Relentless 800 Mono (£XXX,xxx) feature a recognisable industrial design, albeit with comprehensively upgraded PSU, driver and power stages.

The latter model [pictured, right] is said to bring the company's 'reference sound quality to a smaller [145kg] package' and has a rated power output of 800W/8ohm (and 1.6kW/4ohm) courtesy of 84 output transistors in complementary pairs. The 82.6cm deep, 248kg Epic 1600 Mono, meanwhile, follows in the footsteps of the original Relentless Mono, claiming a massive 1.6kW/8ohm (3.2kW/4ohm) from its bank of 112 transistors.

Key to the updates are new power transistors used in both the revised driver and output stages, expanding both its Class A operation and speaker load tolerance. These changes, and the copper/aluminium heatsinks, make 'thermal issues irrelevant', says D'Agostino. Moreover the high voltage 'Super Rail' operation of the driver stage further improves linearity while a new PSU design boosts the S/N ratio of driver/output circuits.

Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems, Arizona, USA, 0208 971 3909; www.dagostinoinc.com



Full-house hi-fi

CD PLAYER COMPLETES EXPOSURE 3510 LINE

Exposure says it has added the 'final piece' to its mid-level 3510 series, with the launch of the £2500 3510 CD Player. Able to function as both player or transport, with digital outputs on Toslink optical and coaxial, the unit leverages the bespoke top-loading drive mech with sliding lid [pictured below] previously featured on Exposure's XM CD [*HFN* Nov '19]. Inside, a double-sided PCB hosts a bespoke clock, dual mono Burr-Brown PCM1704 DACs and a discrete analogue output stage feeding single-ended RCA connections. A remote control is supplied, and the player is offered in black and titanium finishes to match the brand's 3510 series power, pre and integrated amplifier models.

Exposure Electronics, Lancing, UK, 01273 423877; www.exposurehifi.com

HI-FI NEWS' NUGGETS

ECO-FRIENDLY LP

Loudspeaker brand PMC has invested in a UK company that manufactures a plant-based alternative to traditional vinyl. Evovinyl, from Evolution Music, is made from sustainable sugar cane, can be pressed in any colour, and offers a sound said to be indistinguishable from traditional PVC. PMC founder/chairman Peter Thomas also says his company is looking to remove plastic parts from its own products.
www.*evolution-music.co.uk*

X MARKS THE SPOT

Available in two-, four- and six-way versions (priced £260, £390 and £520 respectively), the MKII update of Russ Andrews' X Block mains extension adds an IEC output socket enabling daisy-chain applications, plus a grounding terminal. Internal mains filtering is provided by the company's Silencer technology, while Kimber Kable TCX cabling connects to the X Block MKII's cryogenically treated, nickel-plated input sockets.
www.russandrews.com

Upping the ante

Q ACOUSTICS' 5000 SERIES GAINS TOP TOWER

Arriving to crown the 5000 series launched by Q Acoustics in 2023, the 5050 floorstander (£1299) mirrors the triple-driver configuration of the 5040 model (£999), but partners its 25mm 'mechanically isolated' soft dome tweeter with 150mm Continuous Curved Cone (C3) bass/mid units – up from 125mm. Correspondingly, Q Acoustics has doubled the number of Helmholtz 'pressure tubes' inside the point-to-point braced cabinet from two to four, to optimise its low-frequency performance. Available in Black, White, Santos Rosewood and Holme Oak finishes, the 5050 ships with aluminium outriggers with adjustable spikes, plus magnetic grilles.

Q Acoustics, Herts, UK, 01279 501111; www.qacoustic.co.uk

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Wharfedale does it again

SUPER DENTON CONTINUES SPEAKER MAKER'S RETRO REVIVAL

Wharfedale has expanded its Heritage loudspeaker series with another model that revisits the Denton design of the 1960s/'70s. Yet unlike the previous two-way Denton 80 and Denton 85, released in 2012 and 2017, respectively, the £999 Super Denton – sold in walnut, mahogany or black real wood veneer finish – references the three-way Denton 3 from 1971.

Each mirror image cabinet houses a new 25mm fabric dome tweeter derived from Wharfedale's costlier Dovedale standmount; a 50mm fabric dome midrange driver (this time leveraged from its Evo 4 model); and a woven Kevlar 165mm woofer, tuned by twin rear-facing reflex ports to a rated bass extension of 40Hz. The 940Hz/4.6kHz crossover uses air-cored inductors and 'high-specification' polypropylene capacitors.

To facilitate the compact 360x246x275mm (hwd) enclosure, the Super Denton's midrange and HF units are offset – also allowing listeners to experiment with tweeters either 'out' or 'in'. Supplied magnetic grilles are said to limit driver reflections from the edge of the HDF/MDF cabinets, and are designed to be left on. **Wharfedale (IAG), China, 01480 452561; www.wharfedale.co.uk**

Flagship 'phone from A-T

KUROGAKI WOOD CHOSEN FOR PREMIUM CLOSED-BACK CANS

Priced £3000, the new ATH-AWKG headphone from Audio-Technica features over-ear housings made from Japanese Kurogaki wood, giving each model a unique finish. The material, here lacquer-coated, is also said to help define the performance of A-T's latest flagship, which features 'exclusive' 53mm drivers back by permendur-based magnets and OFC voice-coils. The closed-back capsules, meanwhile, incorporate separate acoustic chambers – Audio-Technica's 'Double Air Damping System' – to fine-tune bass performance. Claimed sensitivity is 102dB/1mW.

The ATH-AWKG's arms are made from magnesium alloy, and the headband and earpads are sheepskin. Hand-built in Japan, the headphone ships in a Kurogaki storage box and comes supplied with 6.35mm and 4-pin XLR-M fabric-braided 3m cables, plus an additional set of earpads from specialist brand ZMF. **Audio-Technica Corporation, Tokyo, Japan, 0113 277 1441; www.audio-technica.com**

Hit the road with the M23

FIIO'S DAP ALSO READY FOR HUNGRY AT-HOME HEADPHONES

Chinese portable/desktop audio brand Fiio, winner of an EISA Award for its M11 Pro digital audio player, has launched a new top-of-the-range model incorporating AKM's AK4191EQ dual-chip DAC for playback of 384kHz PCM, DSD256, and MQA files. Available in Blue Titanium [pictured] or Stainless Steel, the M23 (£649) sports a 5.5in touch display for its custom Android OS, and 64GB storage that's expandable, via microSD, to 2TB. Single-ended/balanced line-outs, and 4.4mm (bal)/3.5mm headphone jacks, are joined by two-way aptX HD Bluetooth. This flexible DAP can also run in desktop mode (with 'Super-High' gain) when powered by its USB connection. **Fiio, Guangzhou City, China, 0343 289 6880; www.fiio.com**

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09-12 MAY	High End, Munich, Germany; *www.highendsociety.de*
22-23 JUN	North West Audio Show, Cranage Hall (De Vere Cranage Estate), Cheshire; *http://audioshow.co.uk*
21-22 SEP	The UK Hi-Fi Show *Live*, Ascot Racecourse Grandstand, Ascot Berkshire SL5 7JX; *www.hifishowlive.com*
25-27 OCT	Audio Video Show Warsaw 2024, Radisson Blu/Sobieski Hotel, Warsaw, Poland; *www.audioshow.pl*

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Oslo Hi-Fi Show 2024

Words: **Håvard Holmedal** Pictures: **Ljubiša Miodragović** & **Tom Mehlum**

Organised by Norway's leading hi-fi magazine, *Stereo+*, aided by local distributors Stereofil, Mala Audio and Analog Lab, the Oslo Hi-Fi Show 2024 was held mid-March for the second year running at the Scandic Asker Hotel, just a short drive from the Norwegian capital.

While still taking place over four floors, this year's event saw the number of exhibitor rooms expand from 48 to 55 with a larger area also occupied by products on static display. The record fair remained very popular, as were the live concerts featuring well-known Norwegian artists, and the series of lectures held by eminent audio figures. The show's marketing campaign also targeted younger people without much experience of hi-fi fairs, and visitor numbers were certainly up on 2023.

Many Italian manufacturers make beautiful speakers and Franco Serblin is one of them, but its new compact standmount, the 405mm-tall Accordo Goldberg [*HFN* Mar '24], shows that the company is not just about fine finish and design. Hooked up to electronics from YBA, including its Signature power amp, MkII Signature preamp and Signature CD player, the Accordo Goldberg sounded wonderfully refined yet highly detailed, while its 180mm 'microsphere' bass/mid cone delivered surprising depth. *www.francoserblin.it*

Based in Lithuania, Audio Solutions makes a wide range of speakers, beginning with its entry level Overture series up to the five-strong Vantage line. The Figaro M2 is another of its purposeful-looking designs, measuring 1108x272x472mm (hwd) and sporting a 19mm 'Mini-Horn loaded' tweeter allied to a 152mm mid and twin 183mm woofers. Electronics were from Eamlab, particularly impressive being the two Classic 250M monoblocks, which appear to offer a very appealing balance between price and performance. *www.audiosolutions.lt*

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Audio Group Denmark took the opportunity to showcase its towering Børresen M6 loudspeakers, set up in one of the hotel's larger conference rooms by designer Michael Børresen and Gryphon Audio founder Flemming Rasmussen, who both now work for AGD. Electronics came courtesy of Aavik and comprised a C-880 preamp and P-880 power amps while cabling was from Ansuz – brands that are also part of the AGD stable. *www.audiogroupdenmark.com*

Jozefina Lichtenegger flew in from Austria not only to present the full range of her EAT products but to assist Norwegian retailer LydKonsept with its online store after it was appointed the country's distributor for Scan-Speak. LydKonsept's aim is to serve the growing number of enthusiasts who buy their audio products on the Internet and who also like to build their own speakers and other audio products. In addition to brands like EAT, Gold Note and Musical Fidelity, LydKonsept also offers DIY construction kits using components from SEAS, *etc*. *www.lydkonsept.no*

Numerous options exist when it comes to bringing music into your listening space but some have to be seen to be believed. The dynamics delivered by these Lyngdorf LS1000 panels were as massive as they looked, showing that custom installations can also produce hi-fi sound – provided you have a spare wall in your living room. *www.lyngdorf.steinwaylyngdorf.com*

The Canton Reference 1 is a three-way bass reflex speaker sporting a 25mm tweeter, 174mm midrange driver and a trio of 219mm woofers, said to reach all the way down to 18Hz. They certainly sounded deep and powerful in one of the smaller spaces at the show, the low-end audible in neighbouring rooms. The amps were from Bryston, and clearly made a good match. *www.canton.de*

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"...if you're thinking of blowing the cobwebs from your set-up, In-akustik has the air!"

NF-204 Micro Air, Editor's Choice, Hi Fi News, April 2022

"There's a lot of hand-made cable here for the money, making it a reliable bet for that first 'big upgrade'."

LS-204 XL Micro Air, Editor's Choice, Hi Fi News, February 2021

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Electrocompaniet used this year's Oslo show to unveil its AW 300 M mono power amplifier for the first time to a home (Norwegian) audience. The amp could be described as the recently released AW 800 M 'Reference Monoblock' [*HFN* Sep '23] split precisely in half but with a power supply that has been upgraded and improved. The AW 300 M is rated at 2x300W/8ohm, doubling to a claimed 2x600W/4ohm. A pair of these monoblocks [top of rack] could be heard driving Monitor Audio's Platinum 300 3G floorstanders. *www.electrocompaniet.com*

McIntosh showed off its ML1 MkII speakers, a re-working of the brand's debut speaker, the ML1, from 1970. Each sealed enclosure houses a 19mm tweeter, one 50mm upper mid, two 100mm lower mids and one 300mm bass driver. The ML1 MkII was fronted by a McIntosh MCD 12000 SACD/CD player, C22 MkV pre and MC3500 power amps. *www.mcintoshlabs.com*

Hegel has updated its H190 amplifier/USB DAC [*HFN* Jan '18] with improvements to the power supply. But the biggest upgrade to the renamed H190v has to be the addition of a phono stage, clearly inspired by the company's standalone V10 [*HFN* Mar '21]. Source was a Hegel Viking CD player [*HFN* Sep '23] while the speakers used were DALI Rubicon 2s. *www.hegel.com*

In the Gryphon Audio room, the company's Diablo 333 integrated amplifier was connected to an Acoustic Signature turntable playing through a pair of Wilson Audio SabrinaX [*HFN* Dec '20] loudspeakers. It was a set-up that saw the room regularly packed with visitors and to their delight, Gryphon's Global Sales Director Rune Skov chose to avoid typical hi-fi demonstration music in favour of metal, rock and fusion! *www.gryphon-audio.dk*

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Taking centre stage in the Mala Audio room was the Astellar turntable from Acoustical Systems. Tipping the scales at nearly 100kg, the deck floats on air and sports a platter comprising 36 layers of 18 different materials (inc. tungsten, titanium and vanadium steel), said to render it 100% resonant free. The pick-up was a DS Audio Grand Master EX [*HFN* Oct '23] while speakers were the Marten Mingus Septet driven by Esoteric's Grandioso C1X Solo pre and S1X power amps. *www.acousticalsystems.audio*

Local distributor Gjallerhorn was on hand to demonstrate a pair of Alumine Two.Five speakers from Swiss company Stenheim, which feature a 26mm tweeter mounted above two 170mm woofers.

The amp used was the Alpha One streaming integrated from B.audio – assisted by a Gigawatt PC-4 Evo power conditioner – fed by an Antipodes CX music server. *www.stenheim.com*

The X Series is Børresen Audio's entry level speaker range, comprising the X2, X3 and X6 floorstanders plus the X1 standmount here. As well as a planar 'ribbon' tweeter, the X1 uses a midrange/bass driver that sees a middle layer of aramid honeycomb sandwiched between layers of carbon fibre. The amp was an Axxess Forté 1. *www.audiogroupdenmark.com*

Stereofil celebrated its 20th anniversary as Oslo's premier high-end audio store by demonstrating MBL's 101 X-Treme omnidirectional loudspeaker system, which comprises one 'ambience' dome tweeter, two radial tweeters, two radial midrange drivers, two radial bass units and no fewer than six 12in subwoofers (three per enclosure, seen stacked in the background). As for the electronics, an MBL 1611 F D/A converter was used in conjunction with the German company's 6010 D preamp and four 9008 A power amplifiers. *www.mbl.de*

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Bryston was once best known among Norwegian audiophiles for its range of hugely powerful amplifiers, but the Canadian company also offers a wide selection of loudspeakers, including the towering Model T10 Line Array models. Measuring 1520x260x410mm (hwd), the design sees dual 25mm tweeters joined by a pair of 130mm midrange drivers and twin 165mm woofers. The speakers were powered by two Bryston 28B^3 power amps, each rated at 1kW/8ohm, controlled by a Bryston BP-19 preamplifier, which for vinyl lovers is also available with a BP-2 MM phono stage on board. *www.bryston.com*

Another first for Norwegian visitors came from Estelon in the form of its three-way AURA loudspeakers. Standing 1366mm tall, each slim and sleek-looking cabinet houses a 26mm Scan-Speak Illuminator tweeter, two 130mm mid drivers and a downward-firing 250mm woofer. Ypsilon's Aelius II hybrid monoblock amplifiers provided the power. *www.estelon.com*

The Kii SEVEN is a wireless, active speaker system with custom 25mm tweeter, 125mm midrange and twin 165mm side-mounted woofers. For many show visitors it was one of the biggest surprises, thanks to a sound that was perfectly adapted to the space via its on-board room correction. Source was an Auralic Aries G1.1 streamer [*HFN* Jun '23]. *www.kiiaudio.com*

Here's Norwegian guitarist and singer Bjørn Berge entertaining the crowd with his own brand of the blues. The live acts proved hugely popular, with Norwegian/British singer Claudia Scott – who hails from Bergen but was born in Newcastle – also on the bill. Berge has recently released a new album, *Introducing SteelFinger Slim*.

Next month

HFN reports from AXPONA (Audio Expo N. America) 2024

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Theme songs

It's not just about the riffs but the plot twists too... **Johnny Sharp** on sets that make every chorus a cliffhanger as he brings you chapter and verse on the Top 20 concept albums

Any ambitious artist needs to challenge themselves sometimes, and there's nothing like a concept album to set the bar high. Why release a collection of a dozen or so unrelated ditties when you could link them all together into a grand statement, an epic tale or a shaggy dog story in song?

It's a high risk, high reward move though. Even previous high achievers have been known to fall embarrassingly at this self-imposed hurdle (R Kelly's *Trapped In The Closet* anyone?), but others have found that imposing a thematic framework around their songwriting helps stoke the fires of inspiration more urgently.

PROOF OF CONCEPT

We've picked 20 albums often regarded as concept works, and while some of these sets of songs are considerably more tightly thematically knitted together than others, they all succeed in threading an identifiable pre-conceived theme through a long-player. Once closely associated with progressive rock, after the grand schemes of the psychedelic era began to grow into grand, triple-gatefold follies, examples of the format have been found across the genres and through the ages.

As for our own thematic guidelines, as ever it's somewhat arbitrary, but for example, we've included records self-identifying as rock operas (a concept album with one eye on the stage) but steered clear of soundtracks if the theatrical creation came first. Shame – we so wanted to write about Stevie Wonder's *Journey Through The Secret Life Of Plants*...

THE BEATLES

Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band

(Parlophone, 1967)

We begin with what surely has to be the most influential concept album of them all, as the world's biggest pop group present themselves as a veteran local military band reconvening to delight the local faithful, albeit seen through the refracted light of an acid-warped lens. While the title track and its reprise bookend the album, songs such as 'Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds', 'With A Little Help From My Friends' and 'A Day In The Life'

bear little relation to the same theme but they still inhabit the same dizzy universe. Such has been this album's legacy that it's now *de rigueur* to downplay its seismic impact.

RENAISSANCE

Scheherazade And Other Stories

(BTM, 1975)

This British act evolved from folk revivalists to jazz and classical-influenced fellow travellers of the prog scene, and this sixth album is arguably their finest hour, even if subsequent hits such as 'Northern Lights' landed them on *Top Of The Pops*. The 24-minute 'Song Of Scheherezade', nodding to Rimsky-Korsakov and taking *Arabian Nights* as its source material, is a wondrous thing, but just as enchanting are 'A

Trip To The Fair' and 'Ocean Gypsy', with Annie Haslam's voice in irresistibly evocative shape. Reissued recently, it's worth a listen for any fan of baroque '70s rock.

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JOHNNY CASH

Ride This Train

(Columbia, 1960)

The Man In Black saw this as a 'travelogue' in the form of eight songs linked by the singer's spoken-word introductions. Each is backed by the chug and whistle of a locomotive, inviting the listener to travel with Cash to a new stop down the track, where he introduces another tale on which he expands in song. Barely half an hour of music is included, but it's the perfect way to frame these vignettes from the time-honoured country music storytelling tradition, and it set a fascinating precedent for theme-based albums to come. His darker, more swaggering output gets more attention, but this still stands up proudly.

JETHRO TULL

Thick As A Brick

(Chrysalis, 1972)

Ian Anderson claims this wasn't a concept album but a parody of the concept album trend, but considering the format was barely a thing back then, this seems questionable. Regardless, this single song straddling both sides of an LP is a fine example of the art form, geared around the faintly farcical but original premise of putting music to an epic poem penned by a fictional eight-year-old schoolboy, Gerald Bostock. Top marks.

KRAFTWERK

Trans-Europe Express

(Kling Klang, 1976)

Several thematically cohesive LPs by these electronic pioneers could be nominated as their best concept album, but this gets our vote by dint of the sweet spot they hit between the cold elegance and cool austerity of their electronic soundscapes and the romantic allure of the pictures they paint. While *Autobahn* celebrated the adventures promised by the motor car, here they make high-speed train travel sound even more enticing, and impossibly modern.

THE KINKS

The Kinks Are The Village Green Preservation Society

(Pye, 1968)

Few bands have a reputation as quintessentially English as these North Londoners, and here they reached peak Albion, even as they displayed their usual love-hate relationship with British culture's modest pleasures, quiet vanities and gentle eccentricities. None of their best-known hits are here, but it's an irresistible conceit from the celebratory title track on in, imbued with affection as well as the sardonic humour that made them so distinctive.

THE STREETS

A Grand Don't Come For Free

(Locked On, 2004)

A 'rap opera', anyone? Mike Skinner's second album as The Streets saw him ambitiously attempt a set in story form, and he pulls it off with such wit and observational skill that it results in a British hip-hop landmark. Following the protagonist's girl troubles while pursuing a mysterious missing £1000, the album takes us from South London to the Mediterranean and back via chemical highs, stoned contentment and heartbroken comedowns. It's a consistently entertaining ride.

KATE BUSH

Hounds Of Love

(EMI, 1985)

Only the second side of Bush's most consistently captivating album is the kind of song cycle usually associated with a concept album, but *Hounds Of Love* is closely related enough for inclusion. It's also a highly original case of an artist taking progressive musical tropes and repurposing them in her own image. While dream pop visions such as 'Running Up That Hill' and 'Cloudbusting' will never get old, the 'Ninth Wave' suite on side two is when the singer really takes us on a trip.

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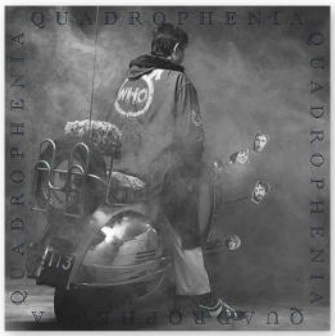

THE WHO
Quadrophenia

(Track Records, 1973)

They're the band most synonymous with the rock opera, the theatrically inclined concept LP (see also 1969's *Tommy* of course), but 1973's *Quadrophenia* is arguably their best such album. Only after it was made into a feature film in 1979 did this portrait of 1960s mod culture, which fuelled The Who's rise, really get the appreciation it deserved. It still seethes with the teenage bewilderment, agony and ecstasy that has fired up so much great rock 'n' roll.

GENESIS
The Lamb Lies Down On Broadway

(Charisma, 1974)

A double album where we follow a young Puerto Rican New Yorker named Rael on a surreal odyssey through a world of labyrinths, chambers of doors, siren-like nymphs, carpet crawlers, colonies of slippermen ('there's no who, why, what or when', since you ask) and of course, supernatural anaesthetists ('If he wants you to snuff it, all he has to do is puff it'). Beautifully shape-shifting tunes and intoxicatingly captivating songscapes help it all make perfectly surreal sense.

GREEN DAY
American Idiot

(Reprise, 2004)

When 2000's *Warning* underperformed commercially, this Californian punk-pop band regrouped and drew on events around them to come up with their next move. *American Idiot* takes the point of view of various disillusioned young Americans as they battle to find their place in a nation fighting a dubious war on terror while its citizens decay. And it manages to do so to a soundtrack blending sharp punk bangers with gnarly but intelligent complaint rock.

FRANK SINATRA
In The Wee Small Hours

(Capitol, 1955)

If there's a godfather of the concept album, it has to be Ol' Blue Eyes. He began entertaining the idea of recording collections of songs around a theme as early as the late 1940s, but on this introspectively focused set, he put together a consciously conceptual album, arguably the first of its kind in popular music. Love-lorn classics like the title track and 'When Your Lover Has Gone' showcase a more sensitive Sinatra, the leading man unafraid to be vulnerable.

MARVIN GAYE
What's Going On

(Tamla, 1971)

Coming out of a period of personal turmoil and increasingly affected by the social unrest around him, the soul superstar poured his feelings into song, weaving a clutch of his best compositions around a story centred on a Vietnam vet returning home to find a fractured, unhappy homeland. What emerged was a landmark in conscious soul music, a set of meditations segueing into each other in what would become the archetypal song cycle style. While lyrically it made the political personal in a way rarely pulled off so arrestingly, musically its subtly symphonic arrangements would lift it to timeless classic status.

KANYE WEST
My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy

(Def Jam, 2010)

His world view might have gone way off the rails since, but back in his imperial phase Kanye could spin all manner of wild yarns and we'd lap it up. And so he did on this sprawling double album, as he pondered aloud with precious little filter on themes of celebrity excess, madness, social justice... and his own undisputed greatness, of course. Meanwhile, his madcap magpie approach to sampling made for what are rivetingly infectious jams.

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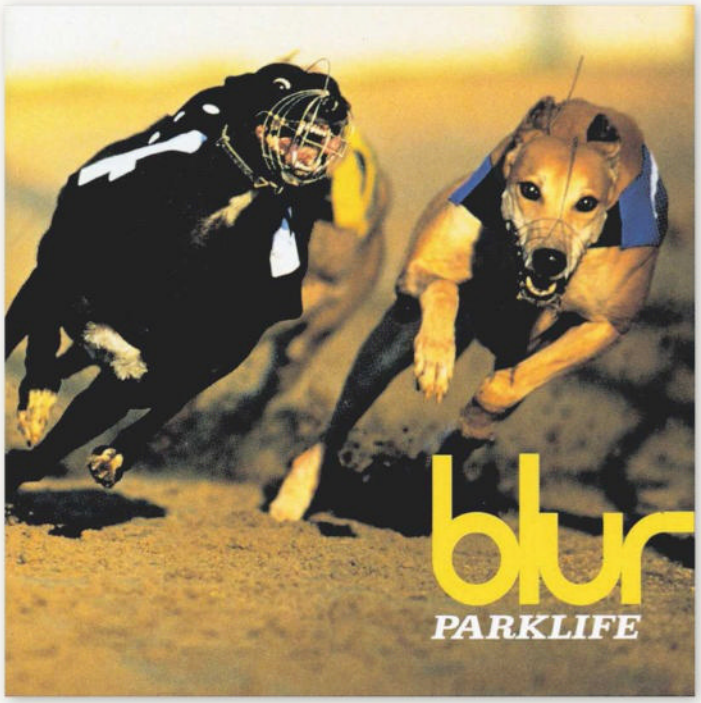
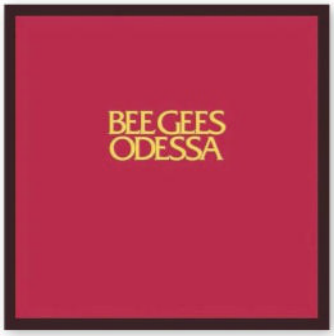
BLUR
Parklife
(Food, 1994)

Emboldened by a creative rebirth on 1993's mod-influenced, grunge-phobic *Modern Life Is Rubbish*, Blur created the second album in what they would later claim was intended to be a 'life' trilogy. Its brash evocation of Britain – with one foot in the land of Reggie Perrin, and one in the world of cheap lager and cheaper thrills as the end of a century approached – was hardly a masterpiece of social observation. Yet the tuneful ebullience with which they related it won through. And when they added elegant touches of romance on string-swathed cinematic pop vignettes such as 'This Is A Low', they touched greatness.





BEE GEES
Odessa
(Polydor, 1969)

Sometimes groups reach for the concept format while searching for a more lasting identity. The Gibb brothers went down that route to limited commercial success but ultimate critical appreciation after their first flush of fame as chamber pop sensations – and many moons before their perma tanned disco-courting ubiquity. Songs loosely based around the loss of a ship in the Baltic in 1899 were infinitely more memorable than that idea suggests.

DAVID BOWIE
The Rise And Fall Of Ziggy Stardust And The Spiders From Mars
(RCA, 1972)

An LP so eternally celebrated that to call it a concept album almost sounds too reductive. Bowie was an artist whose very act was a constantly changing concept. This was the first and greatest: a beautifully doomed future pop star from a pre-apocalyptic universe. Bowie was playing fantasy rock stars but we were true believers, to the point where many reacted with grief when he announced his (*ie*, Ziggy's) retirement from the stage in July 1972.

CAMEL
The Snow Goose
(Decca, 1975)

Is it possible to make a concept album without lyrics? Well, classical musicians had been doing it for centuries, and when the music is as evocative as this piece of classically infused prog, then who needs the story spelling out in words? Paul Gallico's tear-jerking wartime novella about the relationship of a young girl, a disabled artist and the titular bird inspired the Guildford-formed band's defining release – a rare gem of bucolic, symphonically enhanced folk-rock.

THE FLAMING LIPS
American Head
(Warner, 2020)

After spending much of the preceding two decades ploughing a much-cherished but unashamedly wonky furrow through the outer reaches of avant-rock indulgence, Wayne Coyne and Stephen Drozd came back down to earth with a tuneful bump on their most accessible record in years. It was all the more moving for reimagining their own troubled pasts via an alternate history full of childlike wonder, beyond-the-grave elegies and wistful lysergic fantasies.

MARILLION
Misplaced Childhood
(EMI, 1985)

While they graduated from the UK neo-prog scene with hit singles such as 'Kayleigh', this third album from Fish and friends showed they still regarded themselves as prog in tooth and claw. It offered the world a concept album at a time when such inventions had pretty much reached their nadir of unfashionability. They cared nothing for such trends, and a musical therapy session through the narrator's formative years would be one of their greatest achievements.

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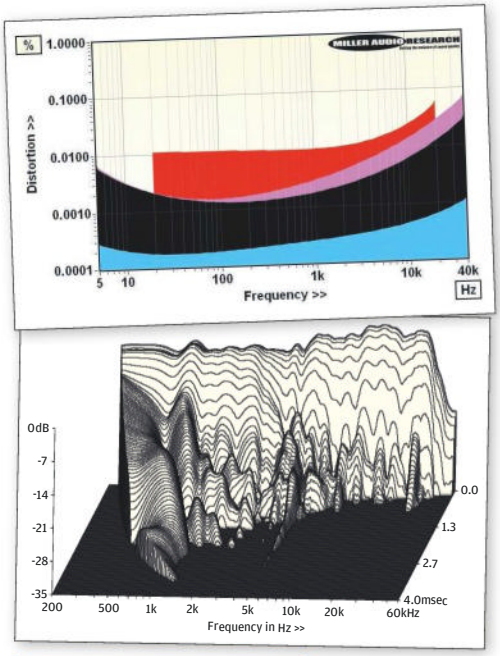


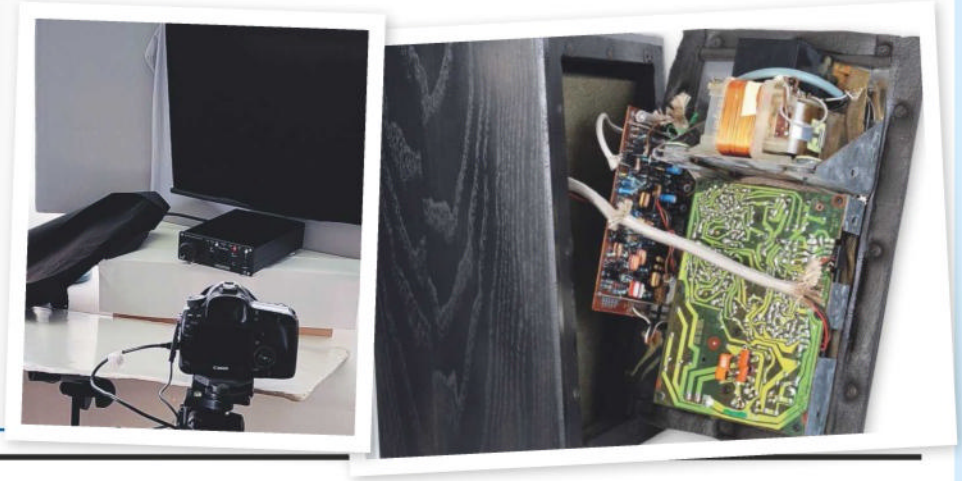
LEFT: Innovative, research-based test & measurement – with exclusive colour 'data visualisation' – underpins every review in *Hi-Fi News*. In each issue you will discover performance-determining facts that are unique to our reporting

ABOVE: Here's Adrian from Magico importer Absolute Sounds dropping open the ramp from the S3's flight case. Moving each 101kg cabinet in for testing was less easy! Our review is on p42

IN THIS ISSUE...

LEFT: Most publications and websites use manufacturers' own stock shots, but *Hi-Fi News* shoots its own pictures to maintain a template for all its reviews. Here's the Violectric DHA V226 [see p74].

RIGHT: Only *Hi-Fi News* offers in-depth reviews of pristine vintage gear, fully pic'd and tested. Here's a look inside the cabinet of Philips' AH585 loudspeaker from 1978, the electronics including a two-way crossover, amps and 'motional feedback' (MFB) technology [see p120].



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Floorstanding three-way loudspeaker
Made by: Magico Loudspeakers LLC, Hayward CA, USA
Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
Telephone: 0208 971 3909
Web: www.magicoaudio.com; www.absolutesounds.com
Prices: £56,998 (M-Cast)/£65,998 (M-Coat)

Magico S3 2023

A decade since the S3 was launched, and then surpassed by the MkII, this three-way has been reborn with trickledown tech from Magico's flagship M9 loudspeaker
Review: **Andrew Everard** Lab: **Paul Miller**

The latest version of Magico's S3 speaker, which was first reviewed in these pages a decade ago [*HFN* Nov '14], isn't what you'd call a mild refresh. Just as the company's MkII version was a major reworking of the original, so this new arrival has been comprehensively redesigned, drawing both on the technology of the flagship M9 model and the measurement abilities of Magico's enhanced development tools. It's yours for a couple of pounds short of £57,000 a pair in the five powder-coat M-Cast finishes Magico offers, or £66,000 in a choice of six high-gloss M-Coat shades, including the striking blue colourway pictured here.

It stands some 112cm tall, weighs a very substantial 101kg and, despite the familiar model number, is basically an entirely new speaker. Given that the S3 has long been one of Magico's most popular models, the thinking was clearly to keep it that way as Magico hits its 20th anniversary. Significant updates have been facilitated by the latest equipment now added to Magico's R&D arsenal at its 'campus' in the San Francisco Bay area, at Hayward, California. It's here that its products are designed, engineered and hand-assembled, a tradition dating back to the company's first product, the Mini standmount of 2004, and including the massive four-way, six-driver M9, standing over 2m tall, tipping the scales at 454kg, and delivered with an offboard analogue crossover to take the all-up weight of a pair to just over a tonne.

> 'The new S3s are designed and assembled in California'

PRECIOUS METAL

Newcomers to the Magico way of doing things are likely to be surprised at how the S3 2023 is constructed, with the beautifully finished cabinet being the most obvious initial eye-catcher. Whereas many speakers use either a wood-based enclosure or some exotic material such as carbon fibre, Magico is all about heavy metal, with four extruded aluminium panels ranging in thickness from around 12mm to the better part of 5cm forming the structure, the pieces precision-milled to give the impression of a design that's all but seamless [see PM's boxout, below]. There'd be a good few car manufacturers pleased to achieve panel-gaps this tight.

Crowned by a hefty top-plate, curved to control diffraction and tackle internal ⟳

BRACE YOURSELF

All-alloy cabinets have long been a hallmark of Magico's loudspeakers, whether in the form of an extruded section, like the original S3 [*HFN* Nov '14], or the machined castings used for the enclosure walls of the S3 2023. Five thick aluminium horizontal plates divide up the internal volume here, as well as bracing and damping the enclosure, but this speaker's choice of materials isn't solely about weight and stiffness. Rather than 'bracing the hell out of it', quipped Magico CEO Alon Wolf, 'we now brace it right'. During my call with him during our review, he explained that 'our new 3D laser interferometry system enabled a very efficient analysis of the cabinet surfaces. We could see where the vibrations – the main panel modes – were occurring, and this informed the placement and forces applied by our bracing, and position of our constrained-layer damping'.

A skeletal alloy frame is bolted to the inside of the cabinet panels, pulling them together and applying a specific tension at intervals. As a rule, resonances are unavoidable but this pushes them higher in frequency, and Q, making them easier to damp. This is achieved using BH5 (Black Hole 5) damping sheets – a laminate of vinyl, elastomer and foam layers – applied to all exposed surfaces on the inside of the walls. In addition, an alloy/elastomer constrained layer (known as EAR), 'tuned' to specific frequency bands, is applied between the drivers on the rear of the baffle. The mix of these techniques is calibrated to selectively 'suffocate' unwanted noise emanating from these huge panels. The laser interferometry provides a window onto the vibration, and provides proof of concept, enabling Magico to claim its new S3 enclosure is '30% quieter' than its predecessor. PM

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'The precision-milling gives the impression of a design that's all but seamless'

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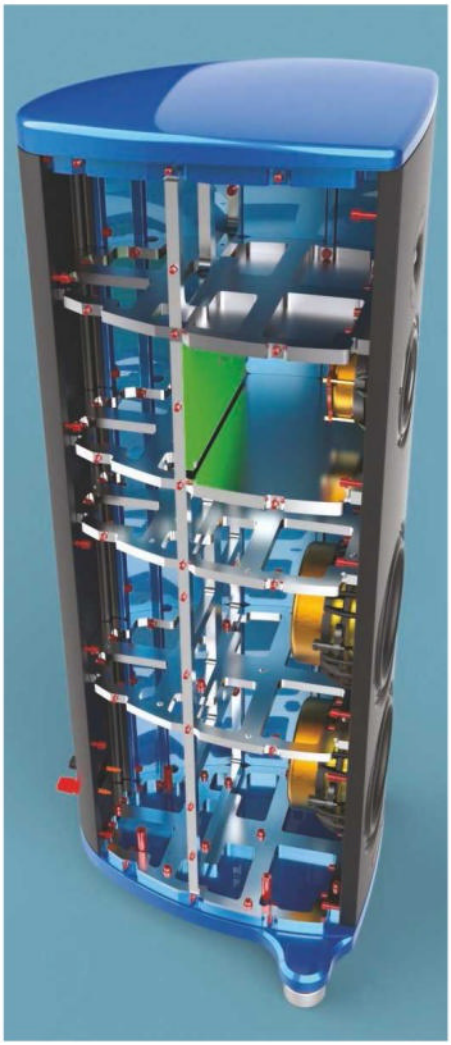

LEFT: The S3's skeletal internal bracing [see boxout, p42] also forms a separate compartment for the 5in/125mm mid unit. The latter's honeycomb aluminium cone is further stiffened with outer and inner layers of graphene and carbon fibre

standing waves, the whole enterprise sits on an even weightier baseplate to extend the speaker's footprint, lower the cabinet's centre of gravity and improve its stability. Three adjustable feet are included, these with a flat, compliant base rather than spikes. Incidentally, the bass arm of the crossover is located within the baseplate while the mid/treble arm is fixed onto the S3 2023's second brace.

ALL-NEW DRIVERS

As much research has been poured into the loudspeaker's new drivers as the new cabinet. The tweeter is now a 28mm unit, its diamond-coated beryllium dome's increase in size – from the 26mm of the previous model – achieved without any significant increase in moving mass. This larger driver includes a new back-chamber, a neodymium motor system, and better integration into the baffle, all for increased power handling, lower distortion and improved off-axis uniformity.

The S3 2023's new 125mm midrange unit has an aluminium honeycomb cone with a graphene and carbon fibre skin that aims to improve both stiffness, also without adding any weight and, by virtue of its profile, enhance dispersion. In classic Magico style, it's driven by an underhung motor system combining extra-large neodymium magnets and a pure copper pole-cap. A key feature of the new unit is a (stable) lightweight foam roll surround in place of the rubber used before – again to boost efficiency and transient performance.

The 9in/230mm cones of the twin bass drivers are, in practice, larger versions of the midrange cones with their alloy honeycomb core sandwiched between stiffening layers of carbon fibre/graphene. A 125mm titanium voice coil, with a pure copper cap, combines with the suspension to give over 12mm of excursion, delivering deep, low-distortion bass at high output [see PM's Lab Report, p47].

WORTH THE WEIGHT

Heavyweight hi-fi typically requires assistance in its unboxing and installation, and the S3 2023 is no exception given the weight and the sheer size of the wooden packing crate in which it's delivered [see p41]. The instruction manual has a nine-step photographically illustrated sequence should you wish to try it for yourself. There are also detailed instructions for positioning the speakers, opening with some daunting advice: 'All that's required is a tape measure, a pen, a calculator, a ball of string, a couple of demo CDs, and some patience'.

I ended up with the S3 2023s about half-a-metre proud of the rear wall, well clear of side walls, and with the slightest of toe-in towards the listening position. The front-end was a familiar set-up – a dCS Vivaldi One APEX player running straight into Constellation's mighty Centaur II stereo power amp [*HFN* Dec '19], located between the speakers for the classic 'long

RIGHT: Magico's pair of 9in/230mm bass drivers, again featuring graphene-stiffened alloy cones, are placed close to the floor to benefit from boundary (bass) reinforcement

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interconnect run/short speaker cables' layout, with all cabling from Transparent Audio. Controlling the system with the excellent dCS Mosaic app [*HFN* Feb '24], the music was hosted and sourced from USB-connected SDD storage, the cost of which was almost comical in the light of what was a truly glorious six-figure system. But then that's high-quality listening, 2024-style. Or possibly S3 2023-style...

MAGICAL SOUNDS

The Espen Eriksen Trio/Andy Sheppard's recording of 'In The Mountains', from the album of the same title [Rune Grammophon RCD2227] was a perfect choice for Magico's S3 2023 to set out its stall – the immediate impression being of presence and three-dimensionality, along with fine instrumental timbres, especially in Sheppard's sax. Similarly, Anaïs Reno's atmospheric *Live At Pizza Express*, on the venue's own PX Records label [PXRCD1008], arrived with all its ambience intact. It was a real 'you are there' experience, with Reno's voice almost tangible.

The recent Lang Lang *Saint-Saëns* album [Deutsche Grammophon 4875019] is so deceptively easy to listen to via these speakers that it's easy to overlook the sheer amount of information on offer, from the scale and delicacy of the soloist's piano to the accompanying orchestra. There was a lovely light airiness to the woodwind in the 'Aviary' section, plus tight control of the plucked strings, while the 'Fossils' section proved joyous with its xylophone and exuberant finale.

Without doubt, the S3 2023 can 'do bass' – as much as you could ever want, but ruthlessly controlled while it's shaking the room. Play Dizzee Rascal's 'What You Know Bout That', from his *Don't Take It Personal* album [Big Dirte3 Records BDR1CD], and the low-end is simply thunderous, but with unstoppable drive and Mr Rascal's chatty vocals entirely intelligible. Change tack to Anna Lapwood's magnificent take on Britten's 'Sea Interludes' [*Images*; Signum Classics SIGCD688], and the delicate 'Moonlight' section has a real sense of the air moving in the pipes of the Ely Cathedral organ. The S3 2023 unleashed the tumultuous 'Storm' interlude with real sonic power, pressurising the air in the listening room and mimicking the instrument itself inside the huge acoustic.

Sticking with keyboards, and the immaculate sound – for a live event – of Jean-Michel Jarre's *Versailles 400 (Live)* [Columbia 48kHz/24-bit download] sounded hyper-realistic, in true Jarre style, through the Magico speakers. The sound of matches being struck and the panned effects at the beginning of 'Oxygene 2' appeared to come from all round the listening room, not just the plane of the loudspeakers. And as the music swells and the bass kicks in, it does so in a truly chest-thumping manner – even at 'sensible' listening levels – while still leaving plenty of space for Jarre's synth lead.

As the set segues into movements from 'Equinoxe', that feeling of a full, rich sound continues: the bass fills the room, effects cannon and whoosh about the space, and the rapid rhythms are tight and crisp. So is the solidity of image between and way beyond the speakers.

HELLO, SQUIRE

Strip things back to voices and 'real' instruments with Liam Gallagher and John Squire's eponymous album [Warner Records 5054197893995], and it's impressive the way these speakers open up the big dense mix of 'I'm So Bored', delivering it with bags of texture and speed. Meanwhile the simpler 'Mother Nature's Song' has that 'sitting in the studio' impact and detail. The sound is redolent of The Beatles and George Martin, which I'm sure was part of the intention.

> 'There's bags of sparkle, and big bass in the middle section'

Talking of studio ambience, Mike Scott's piano demo version of 'The Whole Of The Moon', from The Waterboys' *1985* box-set [Chrysalis ENCLB5 0810098504638], is a wonderfully evocative recording. Once Scott asks for the drums to be taken out, it's just voice and piano in a lively, reverberant space, and all the more exciting for that – especially with the superb resolution these speakers deliver.

With the Ukrainian Freedom Orchestra's recording of Beethoven's Ninth under Keri-Lynn Wilson [Deutsche Grammophon ⟳

RIGHT: Magico's 28mm diamond-coated beryllium dome tweeter includes a shallow waveguide, allowing the chassis plate to be mounted flush with the speaker's gently curved, one-piece alloy baffle

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RS520

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LEFT: Magico's proprietary Elliptical Symmetry Crossover (ESXO) includes capacitors, inductors and resistors made by Mundorf EB GmbH. As usual, a single set of 4mm cable terminals is fitted, so bi-wiring/bi-amping is not supported

4866011], the S3 2023 gave full weight to the massed forces when required, but also showcased a delicate touch, making the sound of the soloists and choir truly thrilling. The former were imaged beautifully, while the choir, set back in the soundstage, wrapped around them to spine-tingling effect.

CINEMATIC SPARKLE

This attention to detail played a major part in conjuring up the big, blowsy vintage sound of the John Wilson Orchestra on *Rodgers & Hammerstein At The Movies* [Warner Classics 3193012]. The 'Carousel' waltz had bags of sparkle, serious bass in the middle section, and that sense of propulsion of the titular, spinning fairground ride. The sound was super-crisp but with that era-appropriate vintage feel, these latest Magico S3s making it both satisfying and hugely enjoyable.

The demanding Dallas Winds/Jerry Junkin recording of the march from '1941' [*John Williams At The Movies*; Reference Recordings RR-142SACD] is a test these speakers pass with flying colours, right down to the rattle of the snares and dynamic punch of the bass drum, set in a broad, deep soundstage. Yet switch to the location 'field recordings' of Billy Bragg and Joe Henry's *Shine A Light* album [Cooking Vinyl COOKCD623], and the S3 2023 delivers just what you'd expect.

BORN IN THE USA

The sound is a long way off studio perfection, having been captured using a minimalist rig on the pair's travels on 'The Great American Railroad', but the immediacy shines through as does the sense of things going on around the duo as they perform, conveyed excellently by the revealing nature of the speakers. And that's what this re-imagined version of the Magico S3 does so well, drawing the listener into the music almost without any sense that it's happening, and rewarding close attention with a fabulously detailed, but above all totally involving, presentation.

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Magico's S3 2023 lives up to its manufacturer's name with a sound as vivid as it is refined, and as compelling as it is analytical. The finish is immaculate, and the construction as solid as you'd expect, and while these may only be 'mid-range' in the catalogue, there's nothing middling about their performance. Drive them with an amplifier commensurate with their capabilities, and prepare to be enthralled.

Sound Quality: 90%

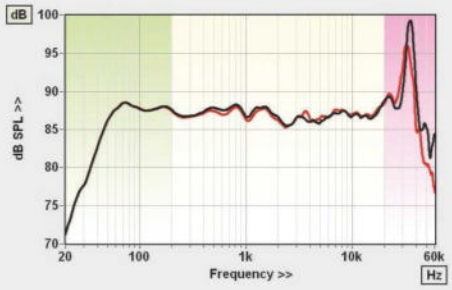
0 - - - - - - - - 100

LAB REPORT

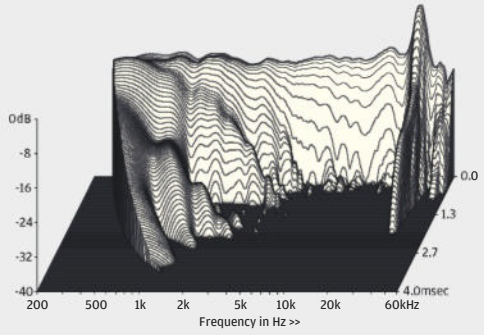
MAGICO S3 (2023)

Magico's original S3 [*HFN* Nov '14] demonstrated a slightly dished mid/presence response but the 2023 model further flattens out the trend with errors of just ±1.7dB and ±1.6dB, respectively, and a tight 0.6dB pair matching [see Graph 1]. The extended treble is also very well controlled, reaching all the way out to 35kHz where the 28mm diamond-coated beryllium dome finally betrays its breakup mode [pink shaded area, Graph 1 and CSD waterfall, Graph 2] at ~10dB above the mean midband output. A slight dip at 1kHz reduces sensitivity to 86.7dB but the averaged 500Hz-8kHz figure of 87.0dB is just a little closer to Magico's rated 88dB (though no input level or frequency is specified here). The power handling of Magico's 125mm '8th Gen' mid and treble units has been improved and this is reflected in the low ~0.2% THD (re. 90dBA/1m) – a fine result bearing in mind the conservative sensitivity of this sealed-box design.

The latter also plays into the S3's improved (bass) transient response and extension where the ~75Hz peak of the two 230mm 'Graphene Nano-Tec' sandwich cones rolls away very gently – closer to a first-order than second-order slope here – to yield a diffraction-corrected 38Hz (–6dB re. 200Hz). In-room, especially with the two woofers placed close to the boundary (the floor), the S3 will deliver deeper bass still. However, there is some penalty in amplifier loading – Magico's nominal 4ohm rating is realised in a sub-5ohm trend from 53Hz-1.7kHz, and a minimum of 2.85ohm/75Hz and <2.5ohm above 18kHz. This is toughest in the deep bass where a big swing in phase angle of –66°/48Hz precipitates a minimum EPDR of 1.09ohm/62Hz. **PM**



ABOVE: Response inc. nearfield summed bass drivers [green], freefield corrected to 1m at 2.83V [yellow], ultrasonic [pink]. Left channel, black; right, red



ABOVE: Cabinet is solid (!), and driver modes all but banished. Note the dome's ultrasonic resonant peak

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83V – 1kHz/Mean/IEC)	86.7dB / 87.0dB / 84.9dB
Impedance modulus: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	2.85ohm @ 75Hz 22.6ohm @ 38Hz
Impedance phase: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	–66° @ 48Hz +36° @ 27Hz
Pair matching/Resp. error (200Hz–20kHz)	0.6dB/ ±1.7dB/±1.6dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	38Hz / 65kHz/47kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.55% / 0.2% / 0.35%
Dimensions (HWD) / **Weight** (each)	1120x300x430mm / 101kg

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Network-attached digital bridge/streamer
Made by: PS Audio, Boulder, Colorado
Supplied by: Signature Audio Systems
Telephone: 07738 007776
Web: www.psaudio.com; www.signaturesystems.co.uk
Price: £1995

PS Audio AirLens

The AirLens is a 'network bridge' between your choice of Roon, Audirvana, JRiver, Tidal Direct, Spotify, your NAS or any DLNA-compatible server, and PS Audio's top-end DACs

Review: **Mark Craven** Lab: **Paul Miller**

For a company that's embraced the digital, online world (founder Paul McGowan is well known for his regular YouTube videos), it's a little odd that PS Audio hasn't completely thrown itself into networked audio playback. Its AirLens streamer, newly launched at £1995, is its only networked product – unless you count the Bluetooth-equipped Sprout integrated amplifier, or its earlier Stellar Strata integrated [*HFN* Mar '21], now superseded by the (non-networked) Stellar Strata MK2.

Even without the new design language that sees PS Audio's standard fascia given a swooping, two-tone layout, the AirLens would still stand out from the Boulder, Colorado brand's lineup. Not part of the Stellar or PerfectWave series, it's currently a one-off model and has a singular focus, which is to act as a bridge between your networked audio and a partnering DAC. Ethernet/Wi-Fi are its only inputs – there's no provision for onboard music storage or connection of external drives.

PROTOCOL PREDICAMENT

An absence of local playback isn't unusual for a network streamer around this price point, but there's plenty more about the AirLens which is unconventional. Firstly, it offers two output choices, neither of which are USB. There's an I²S out, via HDMI, to handle digital files to 352.8kHz/32-bit PCM and DSD256, or an S/PDIF (coaxial) output limited to DSD128 (DoP) and 192kHz PCM. With there being no guarantee that the AirLens' HDMI output will work with all I²S-equipped DACs outside of PS Audio's own Stellar Strata MK2, Stellar Gold DAC [*HFN* Jan '24] and DirectStream DAC MK2 models [*HFN* Jun '23], this will curtail the unit's appeal to some prospective buyers.

The reason for this? As McGowan explains, the development of the AirLens 'during the parts pandemic' meant a USB solution couldn't be sourced, so PS Audio opted not to delay the streamer's arrival by possibly another year. I²S is its preferred connection, and 'because USB is such an inferior protocol to I²S and even coax, we decided to launch the piece without it'.

Neither is there a PS Audio app for operating the AirLens or managing music playback. A decade or so ago this wouldn't have been worthy of note – after all, many digital audiophiles 'grew up' using open solutions such as Bubble or mconnect – but it's unusual in 2024. Audio brands both big and small now offer their own software (albeit often designed by a third party), including T+A and Lumin [*HFN* Apr '24], Auralic [*HFN* Nov '23], KEF [*HFN* Sep '22], Matrix Audio [*HFN* Dec '23] and many more. Here, though, you are pointed in the direction of Roon (the AirLens is Roon Ready), Audirvana and JRiver; third-party UPnP apps including mconnect (from the same company responsible for the AirLens' streaming SoC); or Tidal and Spotify Connect. It's perfectly usable in this regard, but some might expect more in the way of customised functionality.

> 'It reflected the 'Tramp's typically epic arrangement'

DIP OUT OF DIGITAL

Speaking of which, on the underside of the AirLens chassis lurks a surprise. A row of eight DIP switches, a little analogue touch in a digital world, is provided for managing playback over Roon. These, explains PS Audio, let you 'set [define] the capabilities of your DAC so that Roon will know when to downsample music', and consist of PCM, DSD, DoP and volume control options. Again, a control app would have made this slicker, but the good news is that if used with the company's DirectStream MK2, all the switches can be left 'up'. One of these DIP switches also helps instigate over-the-air firmware updates for the AirLens – the alternative being the unit's 'FW' USB port.

If this all means the AirLens feels a little underdeveloped operationally – and better suited to existing PS Audio customers

RIGHT: Compact PCB, with two clocks, hosts an mconnect CDM4140 network audio module [black PCB, left] that supports DLNA/UPnP, AirPlay2, Spotify Connect, Tidal Connect and Roon, and offers I²S/DSD audio output

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– then the same can't be said about its underlying hardware. The focus of this standalone streamer is to reduce the impact of network-borne noise and EMI, which PS Audio says it has achieved via galvanic isolation. The AirLens' input and output stages are separate, with digital audio data passed to the latter 'using only air [transformer-coupling, we assume] as the interface' – hence the first part of the product's name. The second is derived from the integration of the manufacturer's low-jitter 'Digital Lens' clock.

There's a surprising amount of heft to this compact, 254mm-wide unit, too, and the styling is superb (just keep a cloth handy for removing fingerprints from its black gloss top-plate). It feels well put together, down to the sturdy rubber feet that elevate it from your hi-fi shelf.

The front-panel logo changes colour to signify power status and MQA playback.

A rear-panel LED shows Wi-Fi status, with connection handled by WPS; this worked faultlessly with my (Sky) router – not always a given. Ethernet was used for this review, however, with the AirLens paired with PS Audio's DirectStream DAC MK2, running the new 'Massive Mount' firmware that brings measurable benefits in terms of noise and THD [see PM's boxout, below].

HIGH PRIEST

Ideally a network streamer/bridge will have no 'sound' of its own and will simply pass the digital audio data in as clean a state as possible, letting the connected DAC get to work. Any subjective audition of the AirLens is therefore a 'group effort' with the partnering DAC which, in all likelihood, will be one of PS Audio's own. To that end, the AirLens combined with the DirectStream DAC MK2 delivered a sound that was both engaging and insightful, confirming the streamer as an obvious add-on and making for an impressive two-box set-up for a price of around £10k all in.

ABOVE: Slimmer and more compact than the partnering DirectStream DAC MK2 [pictured, below], the AirLens' swooping fascia design mirrors the 'wave' in the blue PS Audio logo

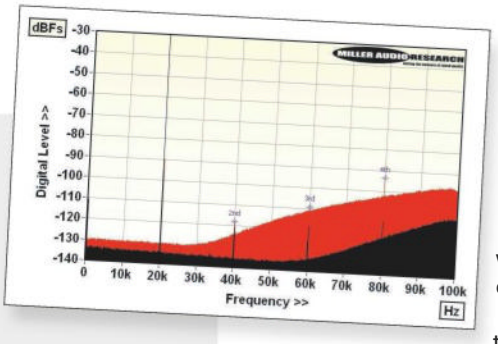
'The Serpent And The King', from Judas Priest's superb new album *Invincible Shield* [Columbia; 48kHz/24-bit], is a fine example of the British band's latter-day period – buzzing with guitar energy, pounding drums and the high-pitched vocals of Rob Halford, who you wouldn't guess was now 72 years old. But while the heavy metal vibes are present and correct, it's a clean, modern-sounding production, something the AirLens/DS DAC MK2 conveyed effortlessly. There was no muddiness or murk to the instrumentation, with every detail coming through.

Turning back the clock to Heart's 1977 hit 'Barracuda' [*Little Queen*, Epic; 192kHz/24-bit], the difference in tone and production styles was obvious, this track being more rough and ready, and warmer sounding. Yet the PS Audio pairing still revealed plenty, including the harmonic flourishes to the slightly phased guitar riff and the vibrato of Ann Wilson's singing. The sense of rhythmic flow was great too, the song driving along atop ⟳

MOUNT MASSIVE

Our review of the 'first' DirectStream DAC MK2 [*HFN* Jun '23 and pictured below] highlighted an unusually – unexpectedly – high level of requantisation noise from PS Audio's proprietary crunching of all input data, up to 705.6kHz and DSD256, into a 'pure' bitstream. This noise was not simply ultrasonic (which brings its own unpredictability with different amps and loudspeakers) but also in-band, pulling the A-wtd S/N down to a below-average 92.5dB. Inspired by this revelation, or not, PS Audio has recently announced a significant firmware update dubbed 'Mount Massive', claiming '...audible noise has been lowered by 10dB, and ultrasonic noise is reduced by 30dB'. Is the true potential of the DS DAC MK2 now realised?

In practice, the A-wtd S/N is improved by 4-5dB while ultrasonic noise has been suppressed by 25dB at 60kHz. This is clearly illustrated by the inset Graph that compares the output (re. 20kHz/–30dBFs) from the DirectStream DAC MK2 before [red] and after [black] the 'Mount Massive' update. This not only indicates that the base noise-shaping/DSD rate has been doubled but that harmonic distortion, arising from fixed quantisation errors, is significantly reduced – note the difference in 3rd/4th harmonics here and general trend shown in Graph 1 [see Lab Report, p51]. Otherwise, the DS DAC's frequency response is only very slightly altered with a fractionally swifter HF roll-off amounting to –0.6dB/20kHz, –3.0dB/40kHz and –12.4dB/90kHz with 48kHz, 96kHz and 192kHz media, respectively. PM



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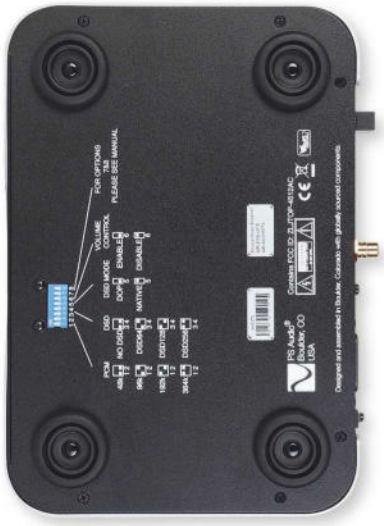
ABOVE: Digital only – the AirLens offers wired/wireless network control/streaming inputs, and a USB-A port for firmware updates. Outputs are on coaxial (192kHz/24-bit and DSD256 via DoP) and as I²S on HDMI (384kHz/32-bit and DSD256 natively)

a focused, punchy drum track. A more expansive, dynamic sound was provided by Supertramp's 'Goodbye Stranger' [*Breakfast In America*; 2010 remaster, A&M], here played easily via Tidal Connect rather than Roon. The AirLens and DirectStream DAC MK2 presented an ordered soundstage with excellent separation of the instruments, but now it was much broader, reflecting the 'Tramp's typically epic approach to their arrangements. And neither did PS Audio's streamer soften the impact of the bass, cymbals and keyboard surges that bookmark the song's opening verse.

BIGGER BITE

And it all sounded very 'musical'. Supertramp's clavinet melodies enjoyed bite and texture, as did the Latino brass and acoustic guitar on Amaia Montero's 'Ni Puedo Ni Quiero' [eponymous; Sony Music], a fairly basic, poppy piece that still surprised with the gentle weight of the bass guitar and the light, breathy touch of Montero's vocals.

The overall feeling is that the AirLens isn't getting in the way of any of the musical information, something apparent with classical guitarist Ricardo Gallen's solo playing of Agustín Barrios's 'La Catederal: Preludio' [Eduaro Records EUDDR1801; DSD64]. This is a performance of both microdetails and acoustic ambience, the sharp attack of the instrument's nylon strings sweetly reverberating in Avila's San Francisco cathedral. It had intimacy and – again – a real sense of clarity and focus.



ABOVE: A DIP switch under the chassis allows the DSD, PCM and volume modes to be configured for Roon so that it will not exceed the capabilities of the DAC

MESSAGE APPROVED

Apart from those DIP switches, there's nothing here to set up or adjust: the diminutive AirLens just gets on with the job of letting the connected DAC get on with *its* job. It succeeds in uncovering the flavour of the music without adding any of its own, so that The Police's 'King Of Pain' [*The Classics*, A&M; 88.2kHz/24-bit] retained its interesting contrasts – sinewy, warm bass guitar behind a resonant piano during the intro, with a thicker, synth-laden mélange as the song hits its stride.

This 'Greatest Hits' compilation closes with a 'New Classic Rock Mix' of the band's hit 'Message In A Bottle'. In truth it's not much of an overhaul, leaving you able to just enjoy the track's familiar rat-a-tat percussion and repeated guitar riff. The AirLens doesn't miss a beat, delivering a precise, defined and involving performance – you could say that by releasing this long-awaited streamer, PS Audio has answered its customers' SOS...

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

The AirLens' specification – a streaming transport without an app and no USB connectivity – will raise some eyebrows, and leaves it challenged by numerous rivals. For those already shopping in the PS Audio aisles, however, it will be something of a slam dunk. The company's new DACs get the network audio solution they've clearly missed, and the AirLens beguiles with the clarity and resolution it brings.

Sound Quality: 87%

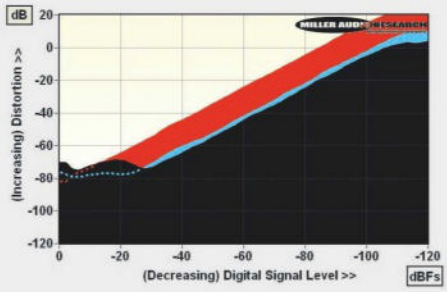
0 - - - - - - - - 100

LAB REPORT

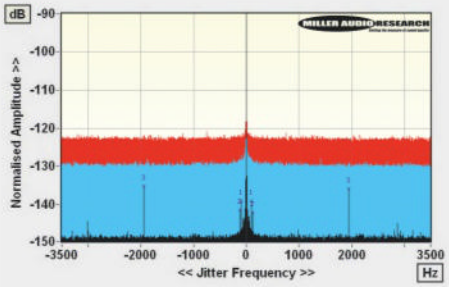
PS AUDIO AIRLENS

In common with other basic/purist network streaming solutions, the AirLens offers galvanic isolation from the network [see *HFN* Mar '24 for details of the EE1 external filter] and with 'signal conditioning' in the form of data buffering/reclocking. Other conditioning network bridges include the Innuos Statement [*HFN* Jan '20], Aqua LinQ [*HFN* Sep '20], Grimm Audio MU1 [*HFN* Dec '20], Auralic Aries G1.1 [*HFN* Jun '23] and Roon Nucleus+ [*HFN* May '18]. Unlike some of these models, however, the AirLens does not enable flexible app-controlled up/downsampling or DSD-to-LPCM when converting between network and S/PDIF or I²S data formats – in this respect it's closer to Volumio's Rivo [*HFN* Sep '23], although *all* these aforementioned streamers offer a USB-B output by way of default. The AirLens' coaxial output is suitable for 'legacy' DACs running to 192kHz and, in this respect, its data reclocking/buffering yielded generally positive results with our usual 'test DACs' including the Mytek Brooklyn [*HFN* Aug '17; black trace, Graph 2], iFi Audio's NEO iDSD [*HFN* Mar '21] and the dCS Vivaldi APEX [*HFN* Jun '22]. All jitter values were within 5-10psec of the best achieved in previous reviews.

Of course, no test of the AirLens would be complete without examining its performance in tandem with the DirectStream DAC MK2 which shares its I²S connection. Correlated jitter from this pairing is still buried beneath the latter's requantisation noise [see Graph 2] although the latest 'Mount Massive' firmware update has reduced both noise and THD [see boxout, p49]. The latest S/N is improved from 92.5dB to a '16-bit' 96.5dB while HF distortion is down from 0.05% to 0.008% (20kHz/–30dBFs). **PM**



ABOVE: Dist. vs. 48kHz/24-bit digital level from DS DAC MK2 over a 120dB range (after Mount Massive update: 1kHz, black; 20kHz, blue; before update, red)



ABOVE: High res. 48kHz/24-bit jitter spectrum from AirLens to DS DAC MK2 [red], with Mount Massive firmware [blue] and into Mytek Brooklyn DAC [black]

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Digital inputs	1x Ethernet; 1x wireless
Digital outputs	1x coaxial; 1xI²S on HDMI
Digital jitter (DS MK2/Mytek Brooklyn)	<5psec / 11psec
A-wtd S/N ratio (with DS DAC MK2)	96.5dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.035-0.036%/0.0035-0.0075%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/40kHz/90kHz)	+0.0 to –0.6dB/–3.0dB/–12.4dB
Resolution (re. –100dBFs / –110dBFs)	±0.4dB / ±0.8dB
Power consump. (AirLens/DS DAC MK2)	4W / 25W
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight** (AirLens)	254x38x178mm / 2.2kg

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Integrated amplifier. Rated at 120W/8ohm
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Web: www.iaguk.com; www.luxman.com
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Luxman L-509Z

Taking its cues from the industrial design and Darlington topology of the L-509X, the latest L-509Z variant demonstrates how subtle revisions can exert a big sonic impact

Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

At first glance, since they look like twins, you might wonder what Luxman has done to the L-509X integrated amplifier [*HFN* Jan '18] to justify the Z suffix. The pesky price increase from £8500 to £10,999 reflects six years of inflation and recent world turbulence, but don't be fooled by nearly identical looks. The devil is in the details.

PM explains the internal changes which impact favourably on the performance [see boxout, p53] but aside from the revised approach to feedback and other circuit tweaks, Luxman has also initiated a number of upgrades to the features. The eagle-eyed will notice that the tone controls now include 'midrange' where the predecessor only provided bass and treble. Similarly, between the VU meters is now a two-digit display to provide a digital read-out of the level while, below the meters, is a row of lights to indicate the various functions.

BLASTER WHITE?

These include 'Separate' (to indicate that the L-509Z's preamp and power amp stages have been parted), Standby and Straight Line, as well as three others – Mono, Subsonic and Loudness – which are activated by the remote control [see p55]. This aluminium affair handles about every other function plus basic transport commands for a Luxman disc player.

Other additions to earn the 'Z' include mute and the facility for two pairs of headphones instead of just one (a 3.5mm socket for 'Phones-1' and 6.35mm for 'Phones-2'). Found on the rear panel are higher-grade 20mm 'cinch' RCA sockets for Line 2, like the heftier gold-plated affairs fitted only on Line 1 on the L-509X, while the remaining RCAs are 18mm. Additionally, there are now in/out trigger sockets for simultaneous switch-on of other components in the system.

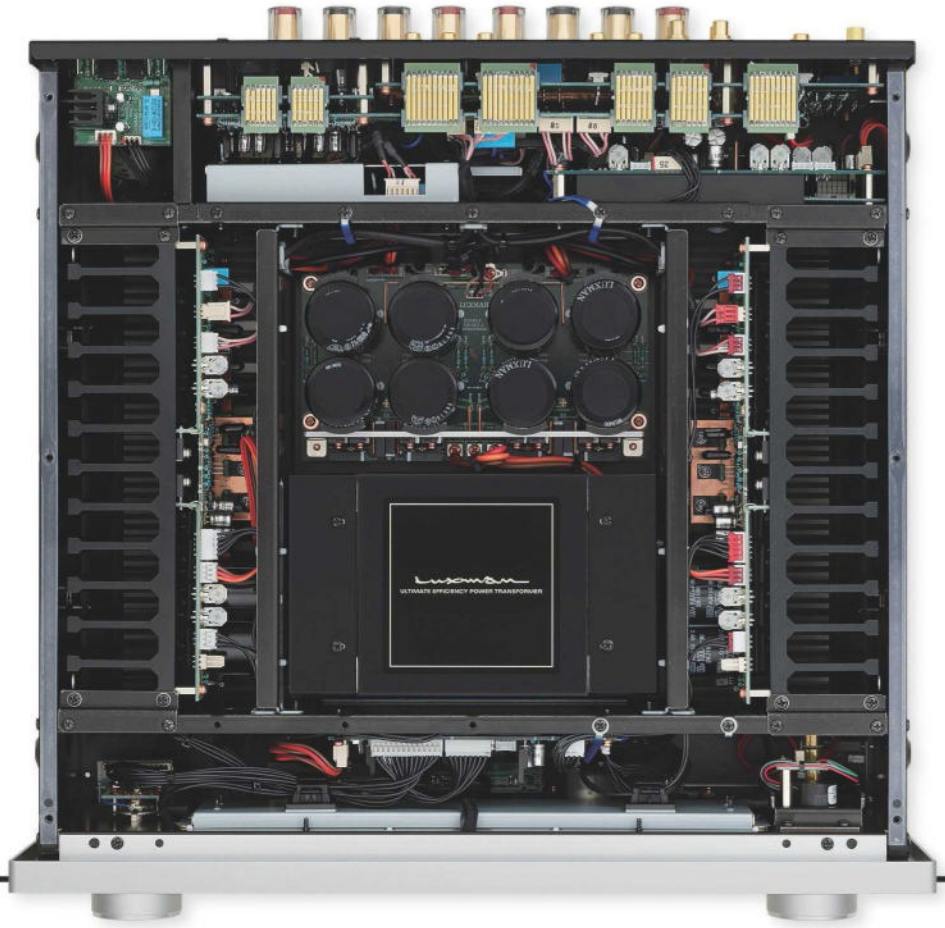
What remains is similar to the L-509X, an equally big beast weighing 29.3kg vs the L-509Z's 29.4kg. The finish is called 'Blaster White', but the less eccentric might just call it 'silver'. The front panel is configured for self-explanatory operation, with the massive, main rotary controls flanking the prominent meters. The left knob chooses between four single-ended line inputs, two balanced XLR inputs, or phono, while the right deals with levels.

> 'It could have been voiced by the tube boffins back in Japan'

Below are the on/off button, the aforementioned 'Separate' button, and a rotary to choose MM and high- or low-output MC cartridges. The next rotary selects either or both of two pairs of speakers, followed by the Bass, Middle, Treble and Balance controls. Lastly are the Line Straight bypass control, Mute and the headphone outputs.

SPACE-SAVER

The gut reaction of many audiophiles spending this much money would be to opt for separates rather than an integrated amplifier. While I agree that it makes sense in purist terms, there is undeniable charm in a unit like the L-509Z, where a host of inputs eliminates any sense of restriction or compromise and the one-box design saves space and AC outlets. Be aware, though, that despite current trends the L-509Z does not have a built-in DAC or network streaming. As PM often notes,



RIGHT: Large 600VA EI transformer feeds mono power supplies and L/R audio stages, the preamp featuring an 88-step LECUA-EX volume control feeding a three-stage parallel-output power amp mounted on huge, finned heatsinks

https://worldmags.net

LEFT: Similar to the L-509X, the Z's front panel is ruled by large illuminated meters, now with a numeric readout inbetween. Input rotary lies to the left, volume to the right, and optional features are in a row, below

digital sources typically sound better when they are outside of, and away from, the amplification. As excellent DACs are now so inexpensive, it's not an issue. More to the point, a number of CD players also have inputs for sharing their internal DACs – my 35-year-old Marantz CD12/DA12 did so a lifetime ago – so this is no hardship.

Two other aspects of the L-509Z also appeal to my desire for a simpler life. The first is the LECUA-EX volume control as found on Luxman's £16,000 C-10X preamp. This has remarkable fine-tuning capabilities, whether using the remote or manually twisting the dial. You really do get to set exactly the level you want, which is crucial when listening at soft volumes.

ANALOGUE RULES

On to the listening, which revealed the other element which will please those tired of nests of cables – the L-509Z's MM/MC phono section. As I started the listening session with vinyl, this deserves emphatic praise because it's the exception to the rule stated above, about preferring outboard components to built-in stages.

Any phono section with only three settings might seem limiting. In the L-509Z, they are the standard 47kohm for moving-magnets, with 40ohm and 100ohm for moving-coils. (The L-509X, by the way, only had a 100ohm setting for MC, so that's another L-509Z bonus.) Yet considering how the vast majority of MCs work perfectly well at 100ohm [see p57], and that both of the MC settings yielded more than enough output for the various cartridges I used, I can't imagine any dissatisfaction with the Luxman's MC gain.

It was hard-bop jazz via a tight quartet which first made me appreciate the L-509Z's freedom from solid-state edge or harshness, in particular both Herbie Hancock's piano and Joe Henderson's sax on the latter's *Power To The People* [Milestone/Craft CR00655]. There was a valve-like warmth, but when called for, a rapidity to the transient attacks which spoke of the amplifier's speed and precision. Given that most of my listening was through easy-to-drive speakers, heft, mass and SPLs were never a concern while life-like levels were always easily achieved. Of course, reverting to LS3/5As meant keeping an eye on the decibels, but even they benefitted from this amplifier's competence and composure.

IN THE RIGHT PLACE

What surprised me the most were the last bars of the last track on Henderson's LP, the 'Foresight And Afterthought' suite. It was a bass fade-out, so smooth and consistent and delicate that I was reminded, too, of why vinyl still trumps digital. But then I had one of those *volte-face* moments thanks to Dr John's *In The Right Place* SACD [Analogue Productions CAPA006SA].

Where was the digital edginess, the lack of air? So mellow, open and spacious was the sound that I had to try two

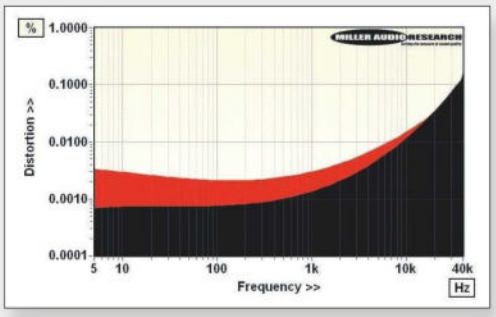
LUXMAN'S 'LIFES' STYLE

Luxman's website (*www.luxman.com/product/detail.php?id=45*) tells us that the compensation regime used in its last few generations of amplifiers – ODNF (Only Distortion Negative Feedback) – had become complex, arguably too complex, in its execution, the implication being that a simpler and more elegant feedback topology might reap some sonic benefit. Enter LIFES (Luxman Integrated Feedback Engine System) which, it says, 'defines an amplification feedback engine blueprint for our next generation of components'. We know that this approach is nested within the preamp and power amp sections of the L-509Z rather than applied globally but this, in itself, is not unusual.

Fortunately while our independent measurements [see Lab Report, p55] reveal very little significant change in either the gain, S/N or power output of the L-509Z versus the older L-509X (aside from a slightly more conservative approach to short-circuit protection), we can see *exactly* how Luxman's 'tweaked' feedback network has altered the balance of distortion and, quite possibly, one aspect of the amplifier's tonal 'colour' [inset Graph shows L-509X, red; L-509Z, black].

As a matter of general principle, negative (regenerative) feedback is applied to reduce the open-loop gain of an amplifier, suppressing noise and distortion proportionally.

RIGHT: Distortion vs. frequency 10W/8ohm for previous and new generation of '509 amplifier (L-509X, red; and L-509Z, black)



For example, 70dB of feedback applied to an amplifier with 100dB of open-loop gain yields a useable, closed-loop gain of 30dB with a reduction in noise and THD of over 3100x (or 70dB, where an open-loop distortion of 5% would be reduced to 0.0016%). In practice the open-loop response of an amplifier falls with frequency and so the ratio of open-loop gain versus closed-loop gain – the amount of feedback applied – must fall with frequency. Thus, distortion typically increases at higher frequencies. Luxman's engineers have clearly revisited this juggling act between the L-509X and L-509Z, and have 'tuned' the newcomer differently. PM

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ABOVE: As seen on the L-509X but trading a tape monitor output for 12V trigger automation. MM/MC phono is retained alongside six line-ins (four on RCAs, two on XLRs), *two* pre-outs/a power amp in, governed via a 'separate' button on the fascia

different players born 20 years apart and two DACs of wildly different vintages – 1995 and 2024 – to make sure it was not the front-end nor the SACD format in general that were responsible for the silkiness. Nope: the L-509Z is a seductive powerhouse that could have been voiced by the boffins back in Japan who tune the company's valve products. Dr John's piano had all the richness and ringing worthy of a New Orleans maestro, while his heavily textured vocals were nasal and gritty in equal measure.

MONO MAESTRO

Surprise followed surprise, a series of revelations even with familiar material. The Paul Butterfield Band's eponymous 1965 debut [Music On Vinyl MOVLP823] is the opposite of Joe Henderson's album, all raw, fiery blues, and Luxman's L-509Z endowed the set – recorded with some haste to capture the live feel – with the most open soundstage one could desire, equal to how a small jazz ensemble fills a room.

Better still were the positions of the two main instruments – Butterfield's blues harp and Mike Bloomfield's guitar, as if positioned on their own plane, developing a true 3D sound with depth and substance. That said, I could not have predicted this amp's mono reproduction. I have heard Ben E. King's 'Stand By Me' countless times, but on the new mono 'Atlantic 75' pressing of *Don't Play That Song!* [Atco RCV1 142] the soundstage was so rounded and full that I thought they had mislabelled the sleeve. Maybe Phil Spector was onto something. The L-509Z made the gap between mono and stereo somehow meaningless.

LEFT: Luxman's RA-17A system remote covers off input, meter options, volume, mute, subsonic/loudness filters and tone defeat

SIT BACK AND RELAX

If I were to meet the following criteria – aspiring to own no-nonsense but also no-compromise amplification and in possession of £11k – this integrated amp would be on my shortlist. There are separates with more slam, more forcefulness. The space-poor could argue for an onboard DAC. I even understand those who crave ultra-exclusive esoterica from companies with two employees and a penchant for quirkiness and zero visibility.

Conversely, I appreciate how some music lovers need stability, and will succumb to the appeal of the more established houses like the 99-year-old Luxman. But neither stance matters once you switch on this absolute honey of an amp. How so? Because the peace of mind the absurdly melodious L-509Z imparts allows you to do something no self-immolating amp can do. It lets you relax... to just enjoy the music.

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Purists will hate me for citing the 'wrong' reasons for loving Luxman's L-509Z, but it's valid – this amplifier oozes competence in every way. Built like a Leica camera, everything works without fuss. It's feature-laden, accepts as many sources as a sane person needs, and it's 'analogue' in the truest sense: just line and phono inputs, with digital an add-on. Oops, I nearly forgot... the sound is utterly sublime.

Sound Quality: 88%

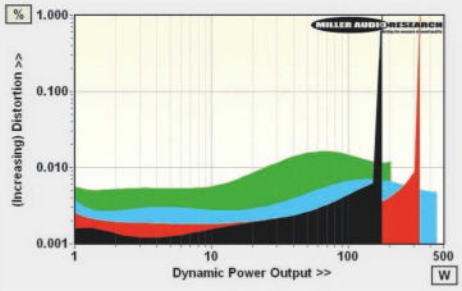
0 - - - - - - - - 100

LAB REPORT

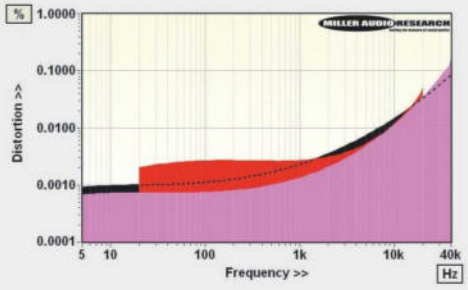
LUXMAN L-509Z

While our tests of Luxman's L-509X [*HFN* Jan '18] suggested a marked evolution over its predecessor, the L-590AXII [*HFN* Apr '16], the differences between the former and its successor – the L-509Z reviewed here – are best posted under the heading of a 'mild fettling'. The +43.5dB overall gain is unchanged as is the 85.6dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW) and power into 8/4ohm loads. For example, the L-509X delivered 2x155W/8ohm and 2x255W/4ohm with a dynamic output of 183W, 342W and 507W into 8, 4 and 2ohm, respectively, and limited by protection to ~300W/1ohm (16.7A). This compares with 2x152W/8ohm and 2x255W/4ohm from the newer L-509Z which has sufficient headroom for 178W and 335W into 8 and 4ohm loads under dynamic conditions but with tighter protection to 449W *and* 207W (14.4A) into the lowest 2 and 1ohm loads [see Graph 1, below].

What of distortion and Luxman's new 'LIFES' compensation regime [see boxout, p53]? Here's where we see the refinement – the L-509Z's distortion remains far steadier versus power output at ~0.002%/1kHz from 1W to the rated 120W while, versus frequency, THD is reduced from 0.0025%/20Hz to 0.00075%/20Hz ('X vs. 'Z) and from 0.0035%/1kHz to 0.0016%/1kHz ('X vs. 'Z) before closing to 0.035%/20kHz (both 'X and 'Z), all at 10W/8ohm [see Graph 2, below]. Any redistribution of feedback looks not to extend to the final output stage because its source impedance is identical at 0.021-0.052ohm (20Hz-20kHz) just as the response shows only the mildest uptick at ultrasonic freqs. (–3.2dB vs. –4.6dB/100kHz, 'Z vs. 'X). Stereo separation can provide an indication of changes to layout (capacitive coupling) but, again, this is unchanged at 82dB/1kHz and 60dB/20kHz. **PM**



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Max. current is 14.4A



ABOVE: Distortion versus frequency versus power output (1W/8ohm, black; 10W, pink; 100W, red)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	152W / 255W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	178W / 335W / 449W / 207W
Output imp. (20Hz–20kHz/100kHz)	0.021-0.052ohm / 0.45ohm
Frequency resp. (20Hz–20kHz/100kHz)	–0.03dB to –0.2dB / –3.1dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/120W)	19mV / 210mV (balanced in)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/120W)	85.6dB / 106.3dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.00075-0.035%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	100W / 429W (1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	440x193x463mm / 29.4kg

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Moving-coil pick-up cartridge
Made by: Goldring (Armour Home Electronics), Herts, UK
Supplied by: Armour Home Electronics
Telephone: 01279 501111
Web: www.goldring.co.uk; www.armourhome.co.uk
Price: £1299

Goldring Ethos SE

The Ethos MC has waved the flag for UK pick-up brand Goldring for over five years, and now the design has been given the 'SE treatment' with silver wiring and more...
Review: **Adam Smith** Lab: **Paul Miller**

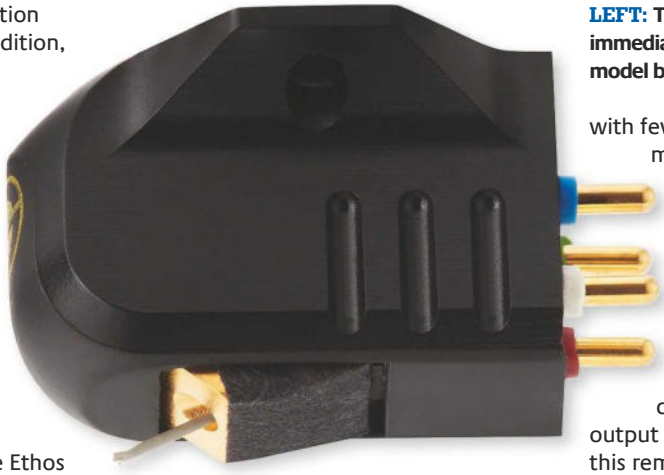
Everyone loves a special edition because, unlike a *limited* edition, it's usually the forerunner of trickledown into the standard range. The hi-fi industry is a fertile ground for such bounty and the latest manufacturer to come up with a tempting morsel is Goldring, its new Ethos SE moving-coil taking its place at the top of the range, priced at £1299. Historically, while this is a big ticket for Goldring it is still rather more affordable than many a premium pick-up from the artisan suppliers based outside of the UK.

To create the 'special' within the Ethos SE, Goldring started with the standard Ethos and worked its magic both internally and externally. The most obvious difference is on the outside, for while the Ethos SE's body is still made from aircraft-grade 6082-T6 aluminium, this has been black anodised to distinguish it from the clear anodisation of the standard model.

GENERATIONAL TALENT

At the business end, the SE's aluminium cantilever and nude Vital line-contact diamond stylus tip, measuring 35x8µm, are carried over from the Ethos. Internally, Goldring's hand-built 'GOL-1' generator assembly was first seen on 1988's Excel pick-up [*HFN* Feb '89] but has undergone a series of improvements in the meantime. It is conceptually the same design, but as the current production supervisor at Goldring also worked on its original incarnation, there is perfect continuity here!

BELOW: The cartridge and its matching matt black headshell bolts are presented in a fully recyclable, multi-layer pop-up cardboard box



LEFT: The new SE version of the Ethos is immediately distinguishable from the original model by its all-black anodised body colour

HOT STUFF

Tweaks have been applied to elevate its performance for this SE version. It still uses a cross-shaped generator manufactured from Swedish iron, but with the pole shoes heated at a high temperature in a dry hydrogen atmosphere, preventing oxidation during the heating process, and then progressively cooled. This is said to enhance the magnetic properties rather than the more usual mechanical properties of the steel. It's expensive, though, and reserved for the Ethos SE. The claimed outcome is both a flattening and extension of the frequency response [see PM's Lab Report, p59].

The final big change between the Ethos and Ethos SE is the switch from standard copper wire to 4N silver for the latter's coil windings. These are lower in resistance and with fewer windings used, so the moving mass of the coil assembly is lower. As a result, Goldring states a reduction in stylus tip mass from 0.37mg to 0.34mg compared to the regular Ethos, promising an improved transient response and, again, a wider frequency range. That said, the company does quietly gloss over the concomitant downside, namely a reduction in output level from 0.5mV to 0.35mV. Still, this remains a perfectly reasonable MC output level and nothing that a likely partnering phono stage will baulk at.

> 'It's blessed with timing snappier than a Savile Row suit'

LIFE BEGINS AT 40

Moreover, unlike some other MCs, the Ethos SE seems refreshingly agnostic to the loading offered by the phono preamp. Yes, the coil change has lowered the internal resistance of Goldring's cartridge to 3.8ohm and using the 'rule of 10 times' this suggests an optimum loading of 40ohm. Yet the manufacturer recommends 100ohm, which is the typical 'standard', along with 47kohm for MM, on most non-adjustable MM/MC stages. Moreover, as editor PM's investigation into loading the Ethos SE shows [see boxout, p57], changes to this load value appear to make surprisingly little difference to the cartridge's frequency response.

The Ethos SE comes double-boxed in typically high-quality Goldring packaging. As a nice touch, the webpage for this model even lists every packing item plus recommendations for its correct recycling. Two different lengths of allen bolts are provided for mounting the cartridge, along with the matching allen key. The Ethos SE's body has threaded holes for easy fitment, and these are tapped all the way through

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the mounting flanges. A manual, inspection certificate and a miniature Goldring history brochure are also included.

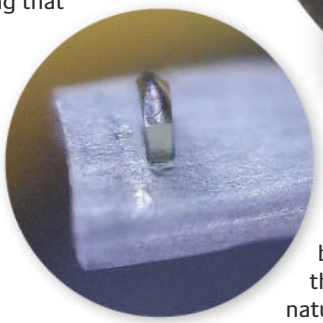
GOING WITH THE FLOW

I installed the Ethos SE into an SME 309 tonearm on my Michell Gyro SE turntable and had an original non-SE Ethos model to hand by way of comparison. Connected to a MoFi Masterphono [*HFN* Dec '23] with the load set to 100ohm, I soon found that a slight decrease to 1.6g from the nominal recommended 1.75g tracking force paid dividends by removing an ever-so-slight leadenness from the bass registers.

Otherwise, changes to both loading and VTA made very little subjective difference to the cartridge's performance. Certainly, if you fancy trying an MC but are wary of getting too deep into the precision alignment and finicky loading that many require, the Ethos SE could be your salvation.

Still taking care with setup, the Ethos SE rewarded with a highly enjoyable sound. It has a very impressive sense of uniformity across the board and doesn't seem inclined to wow you in any particular area. It's not one of those spiky cartridges that almost scream 'look at me!', instead taking a measured approach to vinyl replay that makes it a thoroughly gratifying yet undemanding listening companion.

Compared to the standard Ethos, the SE brings about some quite surprising changes. Goldring's new pick-up might initially seem a little reticent and subdued, but in time you appreciate this is a reflection of a more natural, flowing presentation.



ABOVE: The Ethos SE's 'GOL-1' mechanism is fitted into a milled 6082-T6 aircraft-grade aluminium-magnesium alloy body shell for a total weight of 7.7g. The lugs are threaded

LEFT: Micrograph reveals the 35x8µm (0.3mm) 'Vital' line-contact stylus mounted – very cleanly – through the end of a crimped alloy cantilever

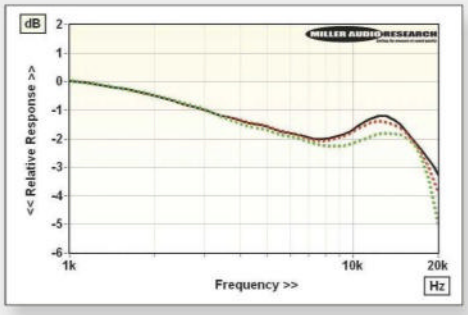
GRAND UNVEILING

I've always liked the basic Ethos and still do, but the SE is a bit more poised and sophisticated. Main vocalists seem to have taken a small step back from the microphone, occupying a more expansive sense of space and revealing more of a performance's ambience. Yukimi Nagano's vocals on 'Come To Me' from Koop's *Koop Islands* LP [Compost Records 234-1] were breathy and vivid, but also benefited from a grand sense of air and scale. They soared from the loudspeakers with joy and power but no artificial edginess.

LOADED QUESTION

The effect of cartridge loading – the impedance being 'driven' by the pick-up – is a topic of some debate among audiophiles, particularly when it comes to moving-coils. These are not sensitive to parallel capacitance in the fashion of high-impedance/high-output MMs but enthusiasts do report audible differences from attempts to best match the source impedance of the MC with the input impedance of the phono preamp. As a rule of thumb the load is usually specified as ~10x the coil impedance, so the Ethos SE's 3.8ohm coil resistance and 3.5µH inductance, equating to an impedance of a little over 3.8ohm/1kHz, might suggest a 40ohm load. Goldring recommends a 100ohm load for its new flagship and, coincidentally or not, this turns out to offer the 'flattest' HF response – there's no difference in bass response – and lowest HF distortion.

In practice, the differences are not huge, and there's no avoiding what looks like the alloy cantilever's bending mode at ~13kHz. Into a high 1kohm load, the Ethos SE shows the greatest treble loss, reaching –5.1dB/20kHz [dashed green trace, inset Graph] while a very low 10ohm load [dashed red trace] offers a +0.5dB boost at resonance and a roll-off of –3.9dB/20kHz. The optimum response is obtained into 100ohm [solid black trace] which is precisely what Goldring suggests. Other factors, including the effect of loading on the electromagnetic damping of the mechanism, may also come into play, so loading versus a tilting of the response is likely to be only one piece of the equation here. PM



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ABOVE: The bodyshape is square enough to facilitate alignment by eye while the rounded front improves the cantilever's visibility for easy cueing

A slightly falling response at the pick-up's top end [see Lab Report, right] could suggest that the Ethos SE will sound soft or lacking bite. And, yes, cymbals miss out on the ultimate metallic zing offered by a cartridge with a bit more energy in this region. The Ethos SE fights back superbly, however, with a level of detail retrieval that doesn't leave you feeling short-changed. The quiet, jangling guitar and percussion effects backing Fabienne Delsol on 'I'm Gonna Haunt You' [*Killing Eve Season Two* OST, Heavenly Recordings HVNLP175] were strong and well-placed behind the vocals and the bassline.

DEEP DISH

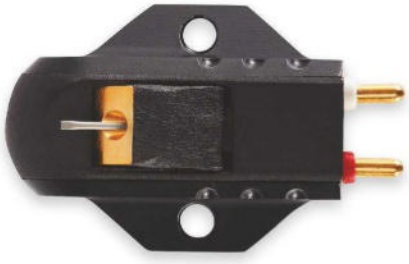
Ah, yes, bass. Fans of deep, low-end grunt will bond with the Ethos SE's rich rendering of bass guitar and drums. Aided by secure tracking, this MC delivers solid, detailed lows blessed with timing snappier than a Savile Row suit. So whether it was pounding out the thundering beat underpinning the Deep Dish mix of De'lacey's 'Hideaway' 12in single [Deconstruction 74321 561051], or capturing the inflections of the rather more sophisticated bassline behind the title track of Jalen Ngonda's *Come Around And Love Me* [Daptone Recordings DAP-076], the Ethos SE's unflappable confidence repeatedly won the day.

Confidence is king here, for the Ethos SE is reliably unflustered by any genre of groove passing under its stylus tip. Often, cartridges that have prominent strengths find you leafing through your record collection looking for particular types of music to play. That's not the case here – whatever LP I lifted from my rack, it did a fine job getting the best from it. From the subtleties of jazz, via the crescendos of a storming classical performance and right to the muddy but marvellously enthusiastic thrash of Biffy Clyro's 'Tiny Indoor Fireworks' [*A Celebration Of Endings*; Warner Records 0190295282097], this pick-up proved unerringly positive.

NEW ROMANTIC

Few cartridges are without a 'voice' of their own, and while Goldring's Ethos SE does err slightly towards the softer side of neutral, this never leaves it sounding ruinously laidback or soporific. It strikes a very fine balance between discovering bags of detail without hammering the message into your ears.

People often talk in clichés about vinyl's romantic 'warmth', which can be irksome because the format is about so much more than that. On the other hand, listening to the Ethos SE, you can perhaps appreciate their point of view...



ABOVE: The short alloy cantilever is visible protruding through a hole in the Ethos SE's front poleshoe. A wrap prevents the ingress of dust and dirt

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

The Goldring Ethos SE is a hugely enjoyable cartridge. Building on the strengths of the Ethos, it adds an extra level of sophistication, and serves it up with a better sense of atmosphere and scale. Add in ease of setup and its indifference to VTA and loading changes, and you have an absolute winner. For a range-topping design that costs less than some spend on cables, this is a veritable audiophile bargain.

Sound Quality: 87%

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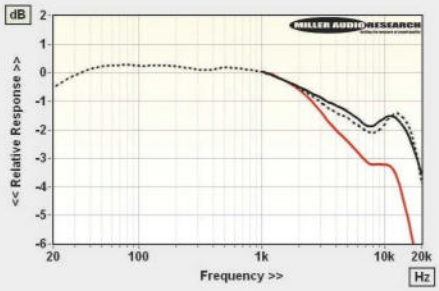
LAB REPORT

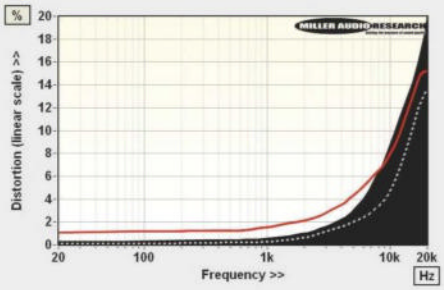
GOLDRING ETHOS SE

As we had not previously reviewed the 'copper-coiled' Ethos, direct comparisons with this new 'silver-coiled' SE model are not possible. Silver offers the advantage of higher conductivity over copper, and the prospect of fewer turns (assisting a lower moving mass and reduced inertia), for the same output. In practice the coil resistance is reduced from 4ohm to 3.8ohm (SE) and while the magnetic circuit has witnessed improvement, the Ethos's output – according to Goldring – has actually fallen from 0.5mV to 0.35mV. In practice it is lower still at 307µV (re. 1kHz/5cm/sec into 100ohm), requiring the services of a superior MC phono stage. Also, the rated 28cu compliance is closer to a stiffer 20cu under *dynamic* conditions, a figure more in keeping with its use in medium effective mass tonearms. The diamond's alignment is better than suggested (VTA is 22° rather than 24°) but secure tracking is not quite at the rated 90µm, at least at the median 1.75g downforce (a 1.5-2.0g range is suggested). The Ethos SE tracks the +15dB groove (re. 0dB at 315Hz/5cm/sec), to within <0.4% THD, but lets slip at +18dB to the tune of ~8% THD.

Goldring offers no frequency response for the Ethos SE [see boxout, p57] but the balance is clearly on the 'rich' side with a gently downtilted presence and treble amounting to –3dB/20kHz with stereo cuts [dashed trace, Graph 1] and an asymmetric –3.6dB/–7.2dB with lateral [black]/vertical [red] cuts, respectively. Central (vocal) performers will be strongly represented... Bandwidth is still very good, however, because the pattern of distortion versus frequency climbs strongly up to 20kHz where it reaches 12-13% (–8dB re. 5cm/sec, 20Hz-20kHz) with stereo cuts [dashed trace, Graph 2]. **PM**



ABOVE: Freq. resp. curves (–8dB re. 5cm/sec) lateral (L+R, black) vs. vertical (L–R, red) vs. stereo (dashed)



ABOVE: Lateral (L+R, black), vertical (L–R, red), stereo (dashed) tracing and generator distortion (2nd-4th harms) vs. freq. from 20Hz-20kHz (–8dB re. 5cm/sec)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Generator type/weight	Moving-Coil / 7.7g
Recommended tracking force	15-20mN (18mN)
Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec)	307µV / 0.55dB
Compliance (vertical/lateral)	20cu / 22cu
Vertical tracking angle	22 degrees
L/R Tracking ability	75µm / 75µm
L/R Distortion (–8dB, 20Hz-20kHz)	1.1-12.5% / 0.15-13.5%
L/R Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.25 to –6.0dB / +0.3 to –3.9dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	30dB / 24dB

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AUDIO FILE

EAT C-Dur

Every product range has its sweet spot and the combination of EAT's C-Dur deck with C-Note tonearm and optional Jo N°5 moving-coil pick-up makes it the 'plum' choice

Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Just below the mid-price point of European Audio Team's (EAT) nine-model range, the C-Dur belt-drive deck looks likely to identify a new price/performance benchmark. We have been flooded with decks at the £10,000-£12,000 mark to designate entry to the scary high-end, and companies such as MoFi, Thorens and Pro-Ject have numerous models from £500-£3000, but something was needed in between from, say, £3000 and £5000. At £3500 with arm, EAT's C-Dur – German for C major – fits the bill.

Shown on these pages is the C-Dur in its high-gloss plum (wooden) finish with the 10in C-Note straight carbon-fibre tonearm, also available with the Jo N°5 moving-coil cartridge [*HFN* Dec '18], all in for £4798. As noted in the box-out [p61], a variant with a black satin finish is offered too, while the future promises more. Whatever else may become available, this is one of the best-looking minimalist turntables I've seen, especially at the price.

ALL YOU CAN EAT

By minimalist, I'm referring to the layout or now-generic look that dates back a half-century to Rega's original Planar 2 and 3: an unadorned rectangular slab of Bauhaus utility, the minimum number of controls, no floppy suspension. But that does not preclude a luxurious presence, and the plum C-Dur looks like a million bucks, aided by the oversized 5.2kg, 13.5in platter which makes it seem more substantial.

Arriving in a crate, the C-Dur is packed with a detailed owner's manual which one might be tempted to ignore if a seasoned audiophile. That would be a mistake, especially when it comes to dealing with the arm's anti-skating arrangement, because little details demand one's attention. As an example, the rear of the deck has only a socket for the outboard 'wall wart' PSU – there are no RCA outputs because the arm uses a supplied cable and 5-pin DIN-style connector inserted from underneath. And you will want to connect it *before* you fit the platter.

Once you've attended to that, as the C-Dur rests on three adjustable feet (which provide some isolation), the deck is simple to level. You then fit the sub-platter [see pic, below] and the round cross-section belt over the pulley, followed by the main platter/spindle assembly. As this deck provides two electronically-controlled speeds, it is not necessary to remove the platter to change between them, as is the case with EAT's less costly turntables.

> 'I risk eliciting groans for my clichéd use of The Eagles'

Supplied with the C-Dur is a felt mat, and I ran it strictly as supplied: no tweaky mats, no pucks. Indeed, I went beyond that as I used the company's E-Glo phono stage and E-Glo I integrated amp [*HFN* Oct '20], so cables aside, it was an all-EAT system from source to amplifier output.

GREASE IS THE WORD

As for the familiar C-Note tonearm [*HFN* Feb '15], it was conceived to combine the advantages of a unipivot with the stability and ease-of-adjustment of conventional gimbal bearings. Available in 9, 10 and 12in lengths, its tube is carbon fibre, chosen for rigidity, while the headshell is aluminium. Inside the tonearm is a special silicon-based grease to dampen any resonances 'by more than 50%' according to the company.

The arm is a dream to adjust bar one aggravating detail. In most respects, the arm addresses convention with an adjustable counterweight for tracking

RIGHT: Low-noise AC motor is embedded into the plinth, albeit with resonance-damping countermeasures, driving the 0.9kg sub-platter via a round-section belt. C-Note arm combines a damped carbon tube with alloy headshell

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ABOVE: Seen here in its high gloss plum finish, the 50mm MDF plinth supports a 1.8kg stainless steel/ceramic ball bearing block and precision-machined 5.2kg alloy platter. 33.3/45rpm speed selection is via top-mounted buttons

force. The counterweight is a two-part affair, with a removable section to accommodate a wide range of cartridges. The headshell is slotted, VTA can be adjusted by loosening two set screws that grip the pillar, and azimuth can be adjusted via a removable nut at the top of the pivot.

Where I issued a litany of '@$%£$!&*£' came with the hanging-thread anti-skating arrangement. A pivoting rod on the platter side of the pillar supports a weight which must be connected via a nylon filament to a barely accessible, knurled screw head on the other side of the pillar, snaked around it in a channel. I recommend fitting this before you do anything else, so you can tip the deck at an angle to work it in place.

Cleverly fitted into the three soft-touch buttons which select 33.3rpm, 45rpm or standby are LEDs to show state of play. Standby glows green when neither speed is selected. Press 33 or 45 as needed and blue LEDs indicate the selection, flickering until the speed is achieved.

INSTANT REVEAL

I was delighted to find, via a precision chronograph, that – depending on whether the LP was 140g, 180g or 200g – the C-Dur always achieved the desired speed at a rapid 3.5-4.5sec [see PM's Lab Report, p63]. This was despite the massive, oversized platter which, by the way, has only one downside compared with 12in or smaller platters: as the mat is thin and some LPs (mainly from the 1970s) lack raised lips around their circumference, you may need to use your fingernails to lift the LP from the platter. Less a criticism and more a fact of audio life, non-suspended decks such as the C-Dur are more likely to be microphonic and so, for best performance, place it on a hi-fi shelf or rack, well away from your loudspeakers.

At the risk of eliciting groans for the clichéd use of The Eagles' *The Long Run* [Mobile Fidelity UD1S 2-029 One-Step], trust me when I tell you that the sound extracted from this amazing pressing was as instantly revealing as anything I might have selected. The kick drum that opens the title track was delivered with such smack, such impact, such force that it even instilled in me increased respect for the rest of the EAT chain, as well as the assorted speakers I employed.

It wasn't just the power or the scale of this underpinning which dazzled me, despite it rivalling the impressions made by Kodo percussion. Instead, it was the *manner* of its delivery. What I heard was uncannily soothing on the ear, a balm that was irresistibly more-ish and inviting, which might have some of you thinking, 'Ah! No top end!'. But that was not the case. What I heard was simply a consistent top-to-bottom presentation shorn of any edginess, while transients remained crisp and the treble extended.

SET IN STONE

It's no surprise that EAT's founder and leading light, Jozefina Lichtenegger, is bringing out customised C-Dur decks. For years, she has addressed her loves of art, fashion and design with various EAT models at shows in purple, green or other hues, while at the time of writing, her company is working on a concrete plinth [see inset picture]. This is unusual but not exactly new as other designers have shown concrete turntables and speakers before – the material's 'deadness', affordability and ease with which it can be moulded and shaped all appeal, even if few of these 'concept' models have ever reached production. As we've seen images of the C-Dur in concrete it's clearly gone beyond mere computer renderings, while the size of the deck suggests its weight will be manageable. Other 'specials' include a version with a sculpted chassis fashioned from highly polished ply, while the deck has also been seen with an S-shaped tonearm.

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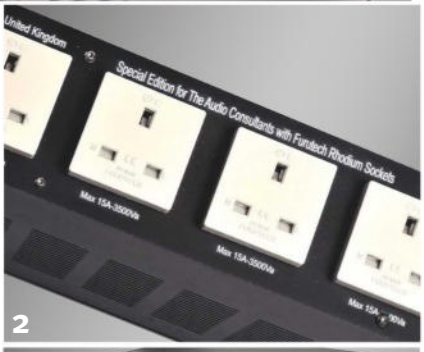

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ABOVE: The C-Note arm's counterweight is damped by a sorbothane-like polymer while the nylon thread for the bias outrigger sits in a groove around the arm base, improving stability. The tonearm leads connect via a five-pin SME/DIN connector

This was communicated repeatedly with every guitar break, the notes precisely defined in attack and decay but with utter fluidity in between. This sense of ease almost pulled me away from focusing on both specific areas of the sound and the overall delivery. What struck me next, then, as the 'nature' of the C-Dur, was the absolutely cavernous scale of its soundstage. Even via speakers as disparate as LS3/5As and DeVore O/93s [*HFN* Mar '23], it was wide beyond the edges, and seamless in between.

OPEN INVITATION

It did not create artificial spaces between the instruments or vocals – quite a feat when a three- or four-part harmony was reproduced both perfectly blended and detailed enough to focus on the individual singers. The openness exposed minuscule details that have eluded me for nearly a half-century. That should allay any notion that the C-Dur's gentility is achieved through a loss of forensic capabilities. Or that it cannot rock: Walsh's solos throughout and especially the crispness of 'Heartache Tonight' put paid to that idea, too.

Attracted as much by the soundstage as by the overall smoothness, I turned to Nancy Wilson's sublime *Son Of A Preacher Man* [Pure Pleasure/Capitol ST-234], which I knew possessed 'big band' scale. No, it wasn't brave of her to cover a song owned by Dusty Springfield and Aretha Franklin, but Wilson made it hers by making it even more sultry. A sublime stylist, Wilson was backed on this 1969 recording by musicians and night-club-style arrangements which wouldn't have been out of place on a Sinatra album a decade earlier.

Here the C-Dur exhibited just the right amount of refinement to showcase a vocalist of supreme clarity and diction, proffering soul, country and blues material. If you believe that the sound system, as much as the recording itself, conveys the emotion in the music, then the C-Dur succeeds beyond any doubts about that balance.

I tested this by trying two other cartridges that are easily distinguished from the Jo N°5, one rather 'cool' sounding, yet the vivacity of Wilson's delivery was undiminished. I did the same with another singer of similar intensity but a completely different mien, Judee Sill via her eponymous debut [Intervention IR-016] from 1971.

While the Wilson album is brassy and bold in places, Sill's exquisite singer-songwriter effort is in the early Joni Mitchell vein. As intimate as any work in the genre, the superb sound of this 45rpm 2LP pressing digs deeper, and both Sill's delicate singing and piano playing were showcased perfectly by the C-Dur. Conversely, they enabled the deck to perform of its best – and please note that I was listening to it in absolutely stock form, as befits any review.

If any instruments embody the capabilities of the C-Dur, it's the two most difficult to reproduce: voice and piano. In tandem, as Sill's were heard here, the C-Dur displayed proficiencies so close to decks at twice the price that it is now my reference in the £3000-£5000 sector. Yes, it's that good.

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

What a joy! Aside from the fiddly anti-skating thread, the C-Dur was a dream to set up, performing flawlessly and encouraging long listening periods. Bizarre it may be to attribute 'relaxing sound' to a turntable, but there was a sense of ease and freedom from aggression which recalls the primary difference, for some, between valves and solid-state. Or, in this case, analogue versus digital – vividly. I love it.

Sound Quality: 87%

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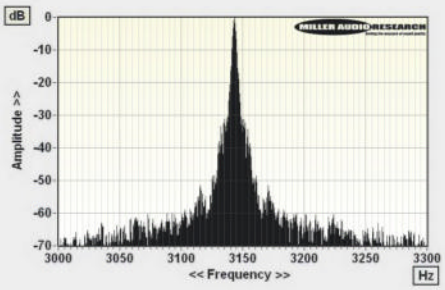
LAB REPORT

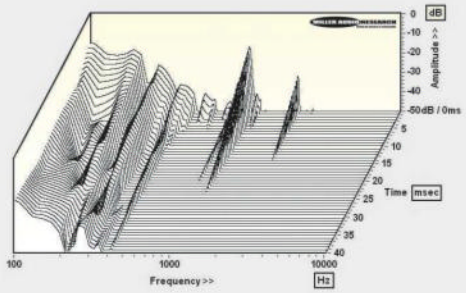
EAT C-DUR/C-NOTE

As supplied, the C-Dur had a swifter 4-5 sec start-up time but a similar, and slightly slow (–0.22%), absolute speed as witnessed in the C-Sharp model [*HFN* Feb '15]. In practice this will be rather less impactful than the excellent pitch stability enjoyed by this deck – a peak-wtd wow of just 0.02% and flutter of 0.04% puts the C-Dur in some exalted company [see Graph 1, below]. This result is especially fine bearing in mind the round-section drive belt is glued rather than continuous... The DIN-B wtd –69.5dB through-bearing rumble improves by about 2dB through-the-groove courtesy of the felt mat, but spectral analysis of the bearing reveals specific noise/resonances between 70-90Hz – again, similar was seen on the C-Sharp and E-Flat [*HFN* Jan '12] turntables from the EAT range.

The partnering C-Note tonearm has a combination Cardan (vertical) and stabilising uni-pivot (horizontal) bearing, which offers good stability and low friction (<10mg) in both planes. This established arm features an alloy bearing housing, tapered carbon-fibre tube and bonded alloy headshell, the latter lifting the overall effective mass to a medium-high 15g, supporting the use of low compliance MCs with 'heavyweight' mounting hardware. The low-slung thread-and-weight bias mechanism is a nice feature, improving the arm's stability. The carbon tube's main bending mode is deferred to an impressively high 200Hz [see Graph 2] with other twisting, bending or harmonic modes at 280Hz and 420Hz, managed by the tube's internal damping (carbon tubes can exhibit high-Q resonances if undamped). The sharp but short-lived peak at 1.1kHz, and likely harmonic at 2.2kHz, are both linked to the alloy headshell/fingerlift but both will be modified once a cartridge is bolted into position. **PM**



ABOVE: Wow and flutter re. 3150Hz tone at 5cm/sec (plotted ±150Hz, 5Hz per minor division)



ABOVE: Cumulative resonant decay spectrum for the 10in C-Note tonearm (100Hz-10kHz over 40msec) showing short-lived modes at mid/high frequencies

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.26rpm (–0.22%)
Time to audible stabilisation	4-5sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.02% / 0.04%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	–71.5dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	–69.5dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	–60.5dB
Power Consumption	5-7W
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	496x170x396mm / 15.6kg

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Web: www.michi-hifi.com; www.cadencedistribution.co.uk
Price: £4999

Rotel Michi P5 S2

After a period of uncertainty, Rotel's destiny is firmly back in its own hands with new distribution partners in the EU, US and now the UK, courtesy of SME-owner Cadence

Review: **Mark Craven** Lab: **Paul Miller**

The resurrection of Rotel's Michi series, previously delighting audiophiles in the 1990s, was a hi-fi highlight of 2019. The Japanese manufacturer again created a strand of components (stereo and mono power amps, a preamp and two integrated models) with a focus on both high-end performance and aesthetics, even going so far as to drop the Rotel name from the branding. Then, in 2023, it announced it was revisiting three models in the lineup, making changes inside rather than out.

Successor to the P5 preamplifier [*HFN* May '20], Rotel's new Michi P5 S2 continues a trend seen in some of the company's more affordable products and the Michi X3 S2 [*HFN* Jan '24] and Michi X5 S2 integrateds – switching the DAC stage over from chips made by AKM to those from ESS. Partly borne out of necessity – a fire in the AKM factory in 2020 disrupted the supply chain [see Welcome, p21] – this means this second-generation unit is more of a 'new' model than it might look. And, yes, the price has gone up too, thanks to inflation and other factors: £4999 versus £3299 for the original P5 four years ago.

CHIP CHALLENGE

As Rotel explains it, a change of DAC chips isn't simple as it combines the third-party hardware with power supply and output components of its own devising instead of implementing a complete off-the-shelf 'module'. The P5 S2 therefore counts 129 component upgrades/changes, including the new pair of ESS's eight-channel ES9028PRO DACs, running in dual-mono configuration. Volume and tone circuits, digital input switching/stabilisation and more have been re-worked and the DAC's current mode output developed with ESS.

This new board, plus the P5 S2's twin in-house-wound toroidal transformers and balanced Class A output stage, reside in a chassis measuring 485x150x452mm (whd). Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and all that, but I would be surprised if anyone thought this Michi preamp didn't look gorgeous, and perhaps even more 'high-end' than its price tag might suggest.

Rotel's standard components are certainly not ugly, but their button-heavy fascias and – as on the RA-6000 amplifier [*HFN* Aug '22] – exposed heatsinks, warrant the term 'industrial'. By contrast, the Michi series is all clean lines, curved edges and gloss-black style, and that includes the stereo [S5; *HFN* May '20] and mono [M8; *HFN* Oct '20] Class AB power amplifiers, which would make ideal aesthetic partners for the P5 S2. Opt for these and you shouldn't have speaker-driving concerns either – the two-channel model, which is priced at £5399, achieved 2x670W/8ohm in our tests while the £6700 monoblock clocked up a handy 1.3kW/8ohm.

SONIC SWITCHBOARD

Back to the P5 S2, which is not networked but is still designed to be a complete system hub with a host of analogue and digital inputs [see p67]. There are unbalanced RCAs for the unit's MM/MC phono stage, plus CD, Tuner and Aux 1 and Aux 2 sources, as well as two sets of balanced XLR ins. There's then a USB-B input, optical and coaxial inputs (both x3) and outputs, while analogue outputs are on balanced XLRs or single-ended RCAs, complemented by dual subwoofer pre-outs alongside a line output.

For system integration, the P5 S2 has a 12V trigger, RS232 and Ethernet sockets,

RIGHT: The P5 S2 has two toroidal transformers and 17 regulated supplies [bottom and centre] feeding an ESS DAC-based digital section [far right], an MM/MC phono stage [top right] and Class A balanced preamp output [top left]

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ABOVE: Preamp front panel is simple and clean – source and volume selectors dominate, along with its large, crisp display. Headphone socket is below volume knob, on/standby below display

plus a USB-A port provided for firmware updates and charging an external device. There's also aptX HD Bluetooth onboard for mobile sources, plus a headphone amplifier feeding a 6.35mm front-panel socket.

That last connection is all that spoils the P5 S2's minimalistic view, as all controls/settings, apart from the source and volume rotaries, are managed from its centralised display. This is not a touchscreen, but instead a supplied, slim remote control handset [p67] provides navigation and enter keys, in addition to volume, source, *etc*. Digging into the P5 S2's settings is a doddle, as not only are the menus responsive to commands from the remote but they are intuitive too.

Options include MM/MC selection, input renaming and tone bypass, with a note in the manual warning that 'a properly setup hi-fi system should not require changes to the Bass or Treble setting. Use these adjustments sparingly'. If, however, you decide to go against Rotel's advice, the P5 S2's display shows a clear ±10dB scale for its bass and treble control.

Rotel's manual also says that 'if you have experience with other stereo systems, you shouldn't find anything perplexing' about the P5 S2. It's not fibbing, either. There's very little housekeeping to do here, beyond dimming the display brightness if desired and being aware of its two PC USB-B settings – one supporting 24-bit PCM, DSD and MQA, the other solely for PCM to 32-bit.

> 'The swirling production was dramatic and enveloping'

EASY ACTION

Not only is it very easy to 'get going' with the P5 S2, this new Michi preamp is also very easy to listen to. Using its DAC stage, via the most accommodating USB-B input (a simple process via a Mac, but Windows users will need to install the driver supplied on a USB stick in the box), it has a moreish, involving sound, with a gentle warmth to its lower midrange and bass but little in the way of obvious softening up top. The P5 S2 can bring your attention to detail without overdoing it, and this applies to its soundstaging, too. Furthermore, its extensive array of inputs offers plenty of scope for sound seasoning.

Hans Theessink and Terry Evans get into their Delta Blues groove on 'Got To Keep Moving' [*Visions*; Blue Groove, 44.1kHz/16-bit], despite one half of this pairing being born in the Netherlands. Through the Michi preamp, there was a righteousness about the way the production was writ large, the twin guitars and vocals sounding big and in the room, yet still precise. The bend of a string here, or a scraped pick there, were as apparent as the timbral differences between the two singers.

LUCID DREAM

Anthrax's 'Only' [*Sound Of White Noise*; Nuclear Blast] is a much less airy affair, its tremolo guitar riffs coming close to the wall of noise the album name suggests, while drums and bass guitar rumble away underneath with plenty of vigour. Yet the P5 S2 made it an exciting listen, steering clear of brashness while still finding the aggression in the instrumentation. The layered vocals in the chorus were neatly unpicked, letting you appreciate every member of the band belting out the song title with varying degrees of tunefulness.

The refined, nuanced sound of Rotel's premium preamp really showed what it could do with the jazzy instrumentals of The Roy Hargrove Quintet's *Earfood* set [EmArcy 0602517641815], played from

ROTEL'S JOURNEY

Founded in 1961 in Tokyo by Tomoki Tachikawa, Rotel has long been held in high regard by stereophiles for both its 'mass market' and rarer Michi models. News that it has secured distribution in the UK after a period of flux is welcome – our recent review of the X3 S2 integrated [*HFN* Jan '24] was predicated on it soon finding a 'home', in this case Cadence Distribution (*www.cadencedistribution.co.uk*), where Rotel will rub shoulders with SME, Rockport, Nagra and others.

Although the company has remained family owned and independent throughout its 63 years, from 1981 its history in the UK and elsewhere was intertwined with that of Bowers & Wilkins. The two companies formed a 'strategic alliance' in which the B&W Group would handle Rotel distribution through its enviable global network. This relationship remained in place for decades, and included the establishment of Rotel Europe in 2000.

More recently, however, distribution of Rotel was complicated by B&W's ownership story, as control of the speaker brand passed from Canadian Joe Atkins to EVA Automation in 2016, then to Denon and Marantz parent group Sound United, before Masimo, its current owner. In 2020 Rotel began to extricate itself from this merry-go-round by securing distribution in North and Central America through Fine Sounds (owned by the McIntosh Group), a move replicated last year in France, Monaco, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands via Fine Sounds Europe. The appointment of Cadence for the UK was announced in Feb 2024.

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ABOVE: MM/MC phono and six line ins (two balanced on XLR) are offered alongside a fixed line out, two sub outs and four preamp outs (two on XLR). Digital ins include six S/PDIF (three coax/three optical), USB-B and wireless BT. The Ethernet port is for control only (alongside RS232 and 12V triggers), and USB-A for charging

CD through Hegel's Viking player [*HFN* Sep '23]. The opening track, a cover of pianist Cedar Walton's 'I'm Not So Sure', had a clear focus on the staccato piano playing dead centre, with brass players flanked left and right. There was a lucid, fluid soundstage, and a fine – but not extravagant – sense of depth.

DRUM MAJOR

Meanwhile, the P5 S2, used here with a beefy Primare A35.2 power amp [*HFN* Dec '19], had no trouble handling the smooth, soft-touch playing of Hargrove's ensemble and the track's dynamic transients. This agreeable mix of sharp and sweet, light and dark, was just as apparent on the album's 'Strasbourg/St Denis', only now accompanied by a more robust and textured double bass and floaty trumpets. Similarly, the atmospheric percussion-led jazz of Kendrick Scott Oracle's 'We Are The Drum', from the album of the same name [Capitol, 96kHz/24-bit], delighted with the taut delivery of his myriad tom-toms.

Armed with an original P5 and its replacement, I was able to indulge in some A/B listening, focusing on the two DAC stages. Differences weren't immediately obvious, because this preamp's sound is surely as much about its high-quality analogue output, but over time I began to appreciate a slight increase in 'sparkle' offered by the S2, a little less of a laidback feel.

It's still cut from the same cloth, though, with a focus on both richness and musicality rather than forensic resolution, which makes it fine with less-than-pristine sources. Even the swirling production of Grooverider's 'Where's Jack The Ripper?' [*Mysteries Of Funk*; Higher Ground] sounded dramatic and enveloping – if not exactly 'hi-fi' – as it fell to either side of the cabinets, samples and synthetic bass dancing around each other.

But, again, Rotel's flagship preamp is at its best with a high-quality source and well-recorded music. The wide arrangement of Pink Floyd's 'Money' [*The Dark Side Of The Moon*; DSD64], was rendered with real skill and a grippy, deep dive into the low-end, while a trip into space with Hans Zimmer's *Interstellar Medley*, played on stage with pals (including guitarist Johnny Marr) for his *Live In Prague* release [Mercury Studios, 48kHz/24-bit], showcased the P5 S2's effortless way with midrange tones.

Building from a quiet intro to a room-filling crescendo of strings and synths, followed by electric guitar and masses of percussion, the resulting sound from Rotel's new Michi P5 S2 offered shape-shifting textures, full-bodied but always seductively smooth. This is the kind of performance that encourages you to listen for hours on end!

LEFT: Rotel's slim RR-RH6 Michi remote offers access to the setup menu and control over input, volume, mute, balance and tone

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

The changes made for this second-generation Michi P5 preamplifier are behind the scenes, and likely not enough to convince existing owners to upgrade. Beyond that caveat, though, Rotel's new unit is an all-round star, mixing a brilliantly inviting sonic performance with catwalk style, foolproof operation and no shortage of connectivity. As a high-end system hub, it completely nails the brief.

Sound Quality: 87%

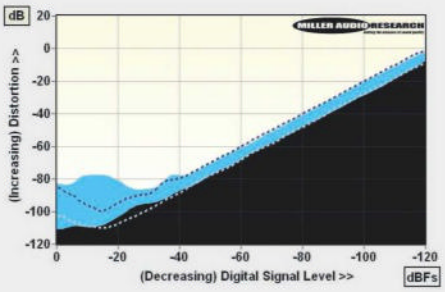
0 - - - - - - - - 100

LAB REPORT

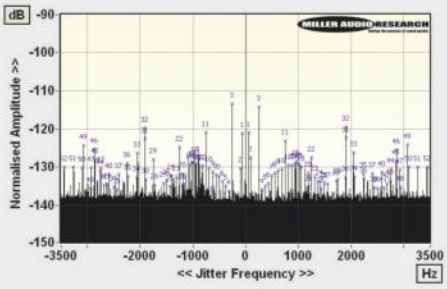
ROTEL MICHI P5 S2

There are numerous 'shifts' in the P5 S2's performance over the original P5 [*HFN* May '20]. Maximum gain is still +10.8dB and the maximum balanced output is still 22.8V, but while the inaugural P5 clipped at vol '90' with a peak level (0dBFs) digital input, the P5 S2 makes it all the way to 'Max' (or vol '96') with a phase-inverted output of 12.9V at 0.00045% THD. As we saw in the X3 S2 [*HFN* Jan '24], the S/PDIF and USB ins are now handled by an ES9028PRO DAC in place of the AK4490EQ used in the P5. Tested at a nominal 6V balanced output (vol '78' in contrast to '72' on the P5) the P5 S2 offers an improved 107.2dB A-wtd S/N ratio (by 1dB), minimal ±0.3dB error in linearity over a 110dB range but a slight *increase* in distortion from 0.0002-0.0006% (P5) to 0.00035-0.0016% (P5 S2) through the midrange over the top 30dB of its dynamic range. At 20kHz there's an increase from 0.001-0.006% (P5) to 0.0095-0.0038% [Graph 1, below].

Jitter is a little lower at 180psec (from the P5's 375psec) with 48kHz/24-bit data but the pattern is still untidy for an ESS DAC [see Graph 2]. Otherwise, a 'fast' minimum phase digital filter is used that offers a 76dB stopband rejection and response that reaches out to –0.17dB/20kHz, –1.0dB/45kHz and –4.7dB/90kHz with 48kHz, 96kHz and 192kHz media, respectively. The P5 S2's 'analogue' response is flat to ±0.05dB from 20Hz-100kHz with an output impedance that increases from 121ohm/1kHz to 314ohm/20Hz, coinciding with a roll-off in deep bass response to –3dB/3Hz. Analogue distortion is very low too, from 0.00012-0.0015% (re. 20Hz-20kHz at 0dBV), and the A-wtd S/N suitably wide at 92.8dB (re. 0dBV). All told, the balanced preamp is a solid platform for Rotel's ESS-based digital solution. **PM**



ABOVE: THD vs. 48kHz/24-bit digital signal level over a 120dB dynamic range (1kHz, black; 20kHz, cyan) versus P5 (1kHz, grey dashed; 20kHz, blue dashed)



ABOVE: High-resolution 48kHz/24-bit jitter spectrum with markers identifying 52 discrete sidebands

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level / Impedance	22.8Vrms / 121-314ohm (bal)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBFs/0dBV)	107.2dB (Dig.) / 92.8dB (An.)
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.00035% / 0.0016%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.0095% / 0.0038%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	+0.0 to –0.2dB/–1.0dB/–4.7dB
Digital jitter (48kHz / 96kHz / 192kHz)	180psec / 150psec / 110psec
Resolution (1kHz @ –100dBFs/–110dBFs)	±0.1dB / ±0.3dB
Power consumption	27W
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	485x150x452mm / 22.9kg

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Streamer/DAC/preamplifier
Made by: Eversolo Audio Technology Co. Ltd, Shenzhen, China
Supplied by: Audio Emotion Ltd, Fife, Scotland
Telephone: 01333 425999
Web: www.eversolo.com; www.audioemotion.co.uk
Price: £1890

Eversolo DMP-A8

If ever the phrase 'all-singing, all-dancing...' could be applied to an audio streamer then Eversolo's flagship model is the promise given form. The DMP-A8 should take a bow...
Review: **Jamie Biesemans** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Search online and you'll discover a groundswell of cheap DACs and streamers playing to every (hardware) whim, making it easy to overlook Eversolo's efforts. But the company, which is the dedicated audio department of Shenzhen-based Zidoo, known for its EISA Award-winning Neo S media player, follows a different, more quality-focused strategy, as the affordable Z8 DAC and DMP-A6 have so far proved.

The DMP-A8 streamer/DAC/preamp sees Eversolo aiming higher. Selling for £1890, it offers an astonishing range of features controlled via a large touchscreen, while AKM's new dual-chip AK4499EX/AK4191EQ DAC solution, plus dual 'femto' clocks and two power supplies, are part of a mix designed to arouse an audiophile's interest. However, while the DMP-A8 is 'multipurpose' like few others, in practice it'll likely be used in a more limited role, putting some features aside. Otherwise you might consider taking a day off work to get to know the many capabilities on offer.

TALENT SHOW

Because of its streaming capabilities, it's tempting to call the DMP-A8 a 'streamer'. As a shorthand, that's okay, but it does the unit a huge disservice. While it can be pressed into a pure streaming role driving an external DAC via multiple digital outputs (including a configurable I²S port), the built-in AKM DAC also allows you to task it with delivering music to an amplifier or active speakers via its RCA and XLR outputs. The DMP-A8 also includes a slick R2R stepped volume control – an expensive component for this price point – that 'clicks' the volume up or down in 0.5dB increments, so pairing direct into a power amplifier is another possibility.

There's a plethora of digital inputs too, including USB-B and HDMI eARC, while analogue line ins allow the DMP-A8 to serve as a conventional preamp. Control over each input and output makes the DMP-A8 into more than a 'switchboard', and ties into powerful, customisable DSP filters that you can apply to each output.

Eversolo's interface makes a distinction between 'EQ' and 'DSP', the former being applied to digital outputs and the latter when using the internal DAC and analogue outputs. Both broadly offer the same thing – sonic tweaking – but 'EQ' is more powerful. It's also possible to apply bespoke FIR filter coefficients, created in REW for example, which will facilitate a level of room correction. You can also define a time delay per speaker, compensating for sub-optimal placement, or create high- and low-pass filters when a subwoofer is added.

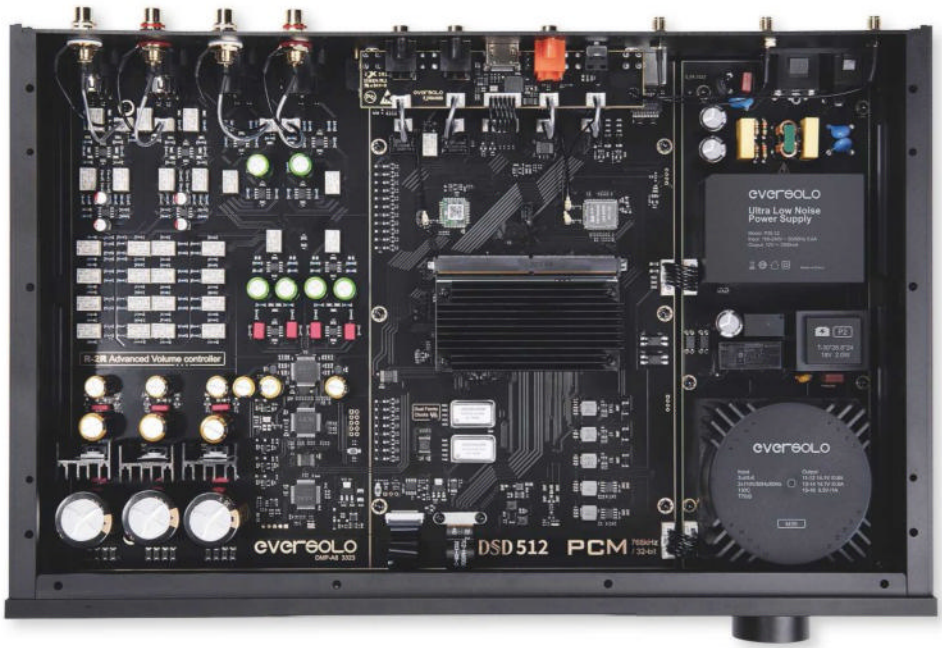
> 'Powerful DSP filters let you customise each output'

AT YOUR SERVICE

Add an HDD/SDD internally or via USB-A, and the DMP-A8 becomes a fully fledged music library/media player. Hook up a USB CD drive, and it'll also copy your discs to this storage, allowing you to set the preferred file format while metadata is added automatically. And when it comes to general file format compatibility, Eversolo's DMP-A8 ticks all the boxes up to DSD512 and 768kHz/32-bit PCM via network and USB connections, and will output digital files in the same quality over I²S and USB.

With the exception of Chromecast, nearly all mainstream and niche streaming options are present. There's AirPlay, Bluetooth (with aptX HD support), Spotify Connect and Tidal Connect, next to a bunch of built-in apps including Qobuz, Tidal and Amazon. I liked the Radio Paradise integration, which offers several FLAC-based stations. Missing in action is Roon Ready status, which is rumoured to be on its way. Perhaps it's telling that a recent firmware update added Squeezeconnect, a hack giving control via the optional Squeezebox support in Roon.

If the DMP-A8's industrial case design looks 'unassuming', that's because your attention will be drawn to the colourful



RIGHT: Combined linear and switchmode PSUs [far right] feed the main CPU/server engine [centre], AKM noise-shaper and DAC [bottom left], analogue preamp and relay-switched R2R ladder volume control [top left]

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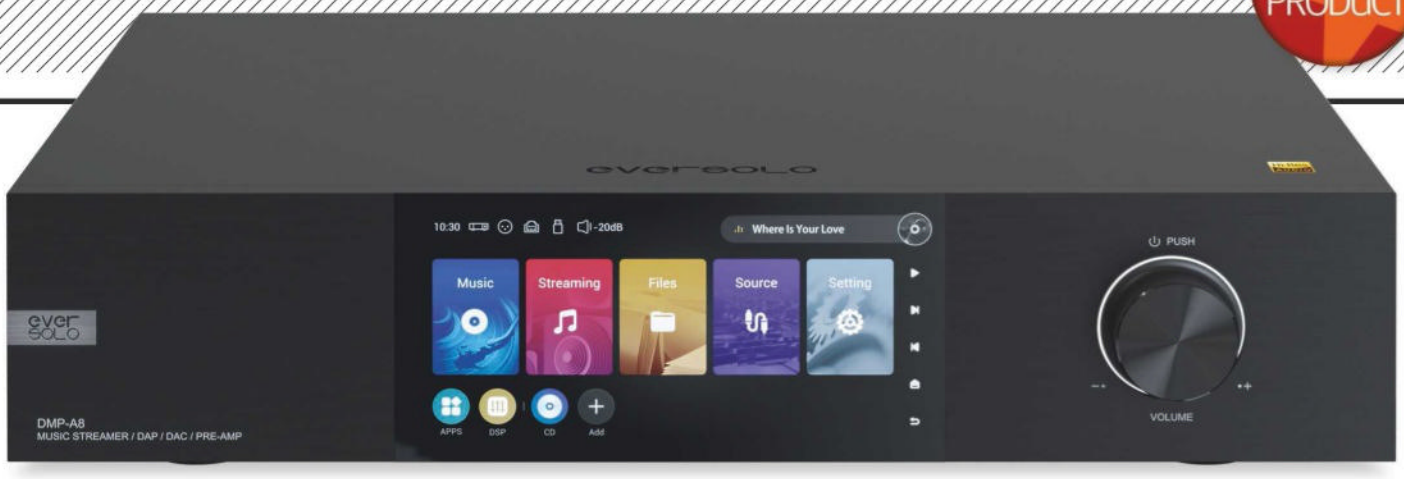


6in/15cm touchscreen – the only physical control is a large volume knob, surrounded by a dimmable circle of light. Otherwise this unit is meant to be controlled via its screen or the Eversolo Control app [see boxout, below] and while a BT remote is provided [see p73], it's mainly useful in preamplifier mode for changing volume, VU meter mode or input.

PLANET OF THE APPS

Using the Eversolo DMP-A8 recalls HiFi Rose's streamers, a competitor hailing from South Korea. In similar fashion, the DMP-A8 uses a stripped-down version of Android (minus the GMS layer Google provides on smartphones) optimised to deliver bit-perfect audio to its internal DAC via the custom EOS Audio Engine. Choosing an Android OS also makes life easier for Eversolo as there are a lot of Android developers out there reacting quickly to issues, as evidenced by the regular release of firmware updates.

Most music service apps built for Android smartphones will work just fine on the Eversolo streamer, making the DMP-A8 more versatile than most. A few of these apps may be installed merely by clicking in the interface, while others require you to find the relevant APK app installer – extracting via your own Android device is the safest route before uploading and installing on the DMP-A8.

Being able to use Apple Music is another major win here because there's no easy way to play its lossless streams on a hi-fi system through a smartphone. On the DMP-A8 a few taps on the screen will suffice, provided you've remembered to enable hi-res playback from the settings in the Apple software.

SCREEN SMARTS

Onscreen interfaces have 'wow' appeal, but it's hard to shoehorn the whole thing into a mobile app. Before you know it, you have to run over to the hardware every time you want to tweak something. The DMP-A8 could have suffered from the same shortcoming but, alongside the Eversolo Control app, the developers have added a Cast option which mirrors the streamer's screen in full on your mobile device.

This is a smart idea that proves its worth the moment you install a third-party app.

ABOVE: The 15cm colour LCD touchscreen will display a host of information using a seemingly limitless range of graphics. The power on/volume/screen off rotary and display are, in practice, usurped by the app [see below]

For both technical and licensing reasons, Eversolo cannot integrate every service you add to the app – if you install Apple Music Classical, for example, you would have to select your choice of music in that service on the device screen. Enable the Cast option, however, and you can remotely view and control the Classical service on your smartphone or tablet from the comfort of the sofa. Problem solved, though the fixed screen ratio does scream out for a larger tablet display, as it's fiddly even on a sizeable smartphone screen.

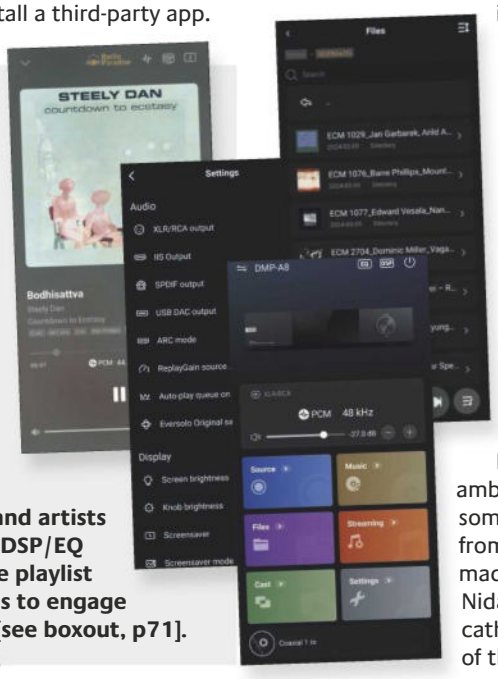
NORTH STAR

I first pressed the DMP-A8 into a preamp role with my Primare A35.8 power amplifier [*HFN* May '22] and Focal Aria Evo X N°3 speakers. Playing FLAC files of 2L's *Tuvayhun* [2L-171] from internal storage, the DMP-A8 extracted the spatial information and fine detail from this magnificent TrondheimSolistene release. This sense of clarity was especially noticeable at the start of track three, 'The Merciful', when soft church bells set the stage and decidedly non-Nordic chanting and flute joined in, creating an Eastern Mediterranean ambience – not something you'd expect from a recording made in Trondheim's Nidarosdomens cathedral, within sight of the Arctic circle.

EVERSOLO APP

As you've probably gathered, the menus shown on the DMP-A8's 150mm-wide touchscreen are quite extensive. The Eversolo Control app does a brilliant job of trimming down and presenting the available options but, with nine main items (including Music, Streaming and EQ), there's still a lot of information to parse. For this reason, it would be handy if you had the option to disable unused services.

Surprisingly, the app presents very differently on a smartphone screen [see screenshots, right] than it does on a larger tablet. This is a clever move by Eversolo, showing a more condensed interface on the smartphone that's closer to the UI on the DMP-A8's screen, while displaying far more on an iPad or Android tablet. On both device types, the Eversolo Control app works smoothly and lets you find music quickly. A tablet is more satisfying, though, showing albums and artists with large images and making it easier to fiddle around with DSP/EQ filters. In the 'Now Playing' screen, which also offers extensive playlist tools and four 'history' lists, a press of a virtual button suffices to engage the spectrum analyser or VU meters on the DMP-A8's screen [see boxout, p71].



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ABOVE: The DMP-A8 runs cool, so the 'heatsink' sidecheeks are an aesthetic gesture rather than functional feature. Again, the elegant simplicity of the industrial design belies this product's versatility

Ibrahim Maalouf's trumpet was displayed in similarly authentic fashion on a great live version of 'True Sorry' [*10 Ans De Live!*, Mi'ster Productions download; 44.1kHz/24-bit], recorded in L'Olympia concert hall in Paris. It built to an emotional and immersive crescendo, but equally the DMP-A8 allowed me to appreciate individual instrumental details. It's a great combination – resolution but also fluidity and coherency – that made the set fly by when I sat down for an evening's critical listening.

This live album contains recordings made at different locations over a two-year timespan, which gives some tracks a very different feel than others, and the precise portrayal delivered by the DMP-A8 revealed the changes. Maalouf's 'Beirut' for example, which recounts his childhood story of wandering off into his war-torn hometown and witnessing something so horrible he can only relate it via music (which explains the mad Led Zeppelin-infused outro), was so pitch-perfect that I felt almost present in the Nantes hall in which it was recorded.

Maalouf has a customised trumpet with an extra valve to sometimes play shrill-sounding quarter-notes. On some playback systems this can be a bit much, but Eversolo's DMP-A8 seemed able to steer clear of stridency. In any case, if the combination with certain loudspeakers had introduced some harshness, the DSP in the Eversolo streamer would have allowed me to slightly roll off the high frequencies, making for a more mellow representation.

> 'It's a recording made within sight of the Arctic circle'

TO DSP OR NOT DSP

It's hard to imagine a bolder stylistic clash than pairing this digital do-it-all with Musical Fidelity's throwback Class A amplifier, the A1 [*HFN* Jan '24]. Visually it might not be a marriage made in heaven, although the cooling fins on the side of the DMP-A8 do match the griddle-like top plate of the MF amp. Keeping the Focal speakers in place, I was only a few albums in before I blithely ignored the sacrilegious undertones and fired up Eversolo's comprehensive DSP war chest.

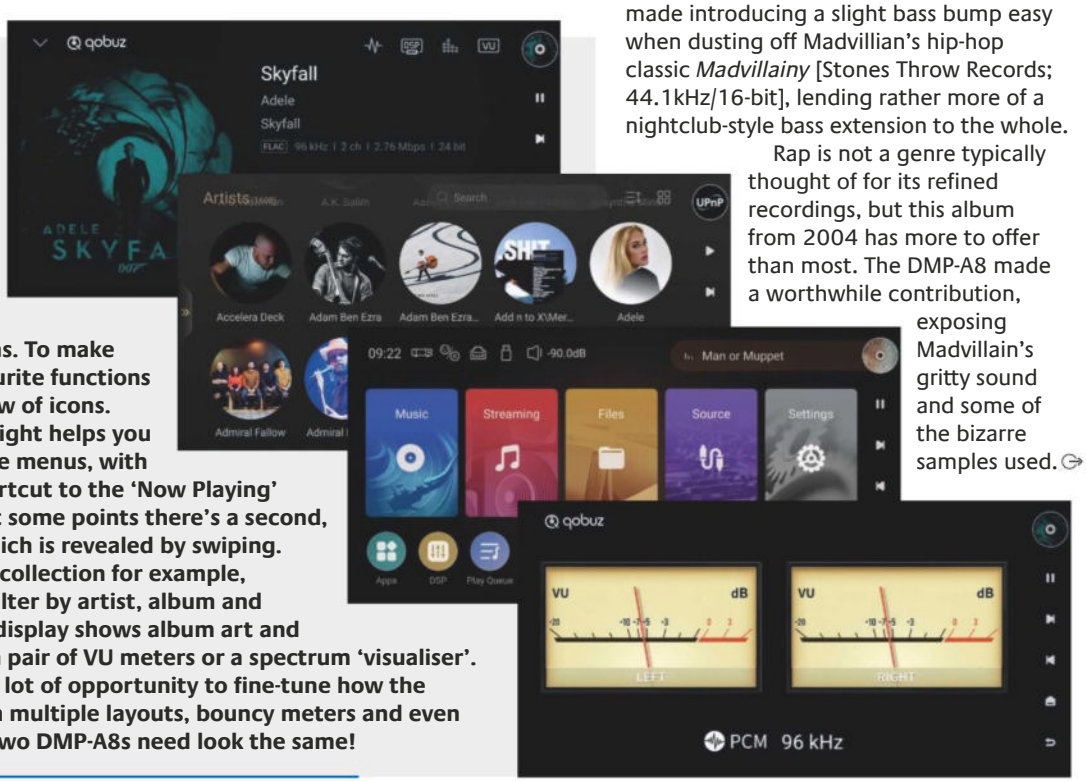
At first this was to lower the DMP-A8's gain by about 5dB, as I had detected some harshness in the fixed-level mode and wanted to create headroom (and lowering the gain to prevent clipping when experimenting with parametric equalisation is a good idea anyway). This made introducing a slight bass bump easy when dusting off Madvillian's hip-hop classic *Madvillainy* [Stones Throw Records; 44.1kHz/16-bit], lending rather more of a nightclub-style bass extension to the whole.

Rap is not a genre typically thought of for its refined recordings, but this album from 2004 has more to offer than most. The DMP-A8 made a worthwhile contribution, exposing Madvillain's gritty sound and some of the bizarre samples used.

SCREEN TIME

The DMP-A8's fascia panel presents a fairly simple home screen with only five main items. It's useful that you're not overwhelmed by complexity from the get go, but once you start diving into each of the five choices, you'll soon discover many, many options. To make life easier you can add favourite functions and services to a bottom row of icons.

A navigation bar on the right helps you select and trawl through the menus, with a spinning top icon as a shortcut to the 'Now Playing' screen. More confusingly, at some points there's a second, hidden menu on the left which is revealed by swiping. When browsing your music collection for example, you'll find buttons here to filter by artist, album and more. During playback the display shows album art and metadata, or if you prefer, a pair of VU meters or a spectrum 'visualiser'. Par for the course, there's a lot of opportunity to fine-tune how the DMP-A8 presents itself, with multiple layouts, bouncy meters and even screensavers available. No two DMP-A8s need look the same!



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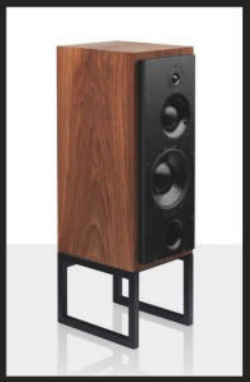

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ABOVE: Alongside the Wi-Fi and BT antenna, and wired Ethernet port, other digital inputs include four S/PDIF (two coax/two optical), USB-B (computer, to 768kHz/32-bit and DSD512), USB-A (external drive) and HDMI/ARC. Digital outs include coaxial, optical, USB-A and I²S (on HDMI). Analogue in/outs are on XLRs and RCAs

Furthermore, while it should be said the EQ and DSP functions of this DAC/preamp are really meant for more permanent alterations than rapid-fire fine-tuning, tweaking is so easy on the DMP-A8 that the temptation is hard to resist...

A device like this also has a part to play in revitalising an older integrated amplifier. Case in point, I connected the streamer to the USB port of a Hegel Röst [*HFN* Jul '17], sending digital audio to the latter's internal DAC, which is limited to 96kHz. It says a lot about the flexibility of the Eversolo unit that I didn't need to change settings – I just connected the USB cable and switched over to the correct output to hear the music continuing to play. Such flexibility is useful for anyone who likes to audition various DACs.

STRESS-FREE

When streaming Katia Guerreiro's 'Mentiras' and '9 amores' from her 2014 release *Até Ao Fim* [UAA #004; 96kHz/24-bit], the DMP-A8 impressed with a natural, stress-free portrayal of her warm vocals and the nimble 12-stringed Portuguese guitar in the background. Out of curiosity, I wanted to compare the older AKM DAC in Hegel's Röst to that in Eversolo's unit, so I connected the DMP-A8 via XLR – bypassing its volume control and the Röst's digital stage. This resulted in a noticeable sonic upgrade, with an increased feeling of space and a higher sense of definition, translating into a greater 'live' sensation.

LEFT: Eversolo's BTR-12 Bluetooth remote covers off the essential 'preamp' functions including input, volume, track skip/play and info

ALL-ACTION DAC

My experiment also highlighted something about the DMP-A8 which is easy to forget when faced by so many ways to stream and manipulate music: the DAC stage in this unit performs admirably, marrying an organic, wholesome presentation with lots of detail.

Playing 'Yasuke In Roppongi' from the recent *I Too Am A Stranger* album [ATA033; 48kHz/24-bit] by Leeds' funk-jazz formation The Sorcerers, I was convincingly catapulted into a 1970s action flick. The funky drum licks and fat brass sounded lifelike, making it easy to get into the groove. Moreover, when the gnarly-sounding sax solo arrived, just past the three-minute mark, I was immersed in a superbly high quality performance that's truly rare at the Eversolo DMP-A8's price point. A job well done, indeed!

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Not everyone will need the huge versatility this streamer/DAC/preamplifier offers. However, with its superb DAC, far-reaching connectivity, an interface replete with streaming/tuning options, storage and app expandability, powerful DSP modes, and good usability (although the complexity might be off-putting to some), it's a genre-defining product that – happily – does not put functionality before sound quality.

Sound Quality: 88%

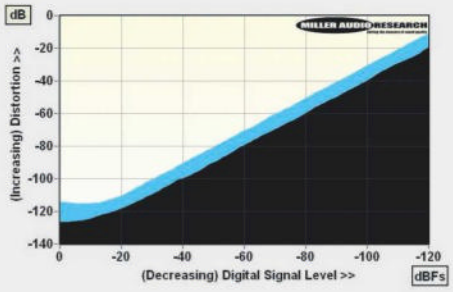
0 - - - - - - - - 100

LAB REPORT

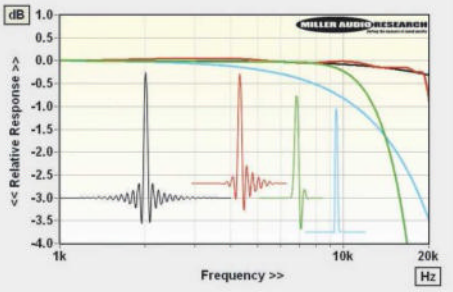
EVERSOLO DMP-A8

Eversolo's implementation of the AK4191EQ upsampling/noise-shaper with the AK4499EXEQ DAC [see Welcome, p21] extracts a superb performance, the DMP-A8's balanced analogue output realising 4.2V from a (flat) 49ohm source impedance with a peak (0dBFs) digital input. Distortion – very likely 'analogue' rather than 'digital' – is spectacularly low at just 0.00003-0.00009% (20Hz-20kHz), requiring a shifted 0dB to –140dB Y scale [Graph 1, below] in place of the usual 20dB to –120dB scaling. This result is complemented by a wide 116dB A-wtd S/N ratio and low-level linearity that's true to within ±0.1dB over a full 110dB dynamic range. Very, very few other DAC products can match this, including those using proprietary DSP-based solutions. Jitter, too, is squeezed down to below 10psec at all sample rates – the DMP-A8 chalking up more state-of-the-art figures.

The AK4191EQ modulator includes six filter coefficients, including two linear-phase (Sharp and Slow) and two minimum phase types (Short Delay Sharp and Slow). The two sharp filters have the same –0.3dB/20kHz, –1.8dB/45kHz and –4.6dB/90kHz response with 48kHz, 96kHz and 192kHz media, respectively, with a similar 104dB stopband rejection. By contrast, the slow-roll off types trade a limited 8.5dB stopband rejection and –8.6dB/20kHz, –10.9dB/45kHz and –13.8dB/90kHz response for minimal ringing/time domain distortion. The 'Low Dispersion' filter is a hybrid type but shows in-band ripples [red trace, Graph 2] while the 'Super Slow' filter [blue trace, Graph 2] is a NOS type with no stopband suppression, an early roll-off to –3.5dB/20kHz, –4.8dB/45kHz and –7.6dB/90kHz but no time domain distortion. The latter is best used with 96kHz+ sample rate music files. **PM**



ABOVE: THD vs. 48kHz/24-bit signal level over a 120dB range (1kHz, black; 20kHz, blue). Note shifted Y scale



ABOVE: Impulse and freq. responses (expanded scale, 1kHz-20kHz) with 48kHz data (Sharp, black; Short Slow, green; Super Slow, cyan; Low Dispersion, red)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level / Impedance	4.225Vrms / 49ohm (bal)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBFs/0dBV)	115.8dB (Dig.) / 103.1dB (An.)
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.00003% / 0.00009%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.00025% / 0.0003%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	+0.0 to –0.3dB/–1.8dB/–4.6dB
Digital jitter (48kHz / 96kHz / 192kHz)	8psec / 10psec / 10psec
Resolution (1kHz @ –100dBFs/–110dBFs)	±0.1dB / ±0.1dB
Power consumption	12W
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	388x90x248mm / 4kg

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Violectric DHA V226

Hailing from the shores of Lake Constance in Germany, Violectric offers a wide range of headphone and combined DAC/headphone preamps. We dip our toes into its waters...
Review: **Andrew Everard** Lab: **Paul Miller**

The Violectric name may be new to you, as it was to me, but behind the brand is a company getting on for four decades in business, principally in the pro audio field, where it operates under the rather unusual moniker of Lake People – inspired by the company's location in the Lake Constance region of Germany. Like many an audio brand from that country, the company designs and manufactures its products in-house, and is proud of the 'Made in Germany' label.

Since 2009 it has been designing products for what it calls 'the private sector' under the Violectric brand, using the technology of its pro models to address the consumer audio market. It offers a wide range of headphone amplifiers covering just about every usage requirement, from the pocket-sized USB-powered Chronos at £185 all the way up to the £5140 US 5 PRO from sub-brand Niimbus.

FLEXIBLE FRIEND

The DHA V226 we have here is its least expensive mains-powered DAC/headphone amp, at £1230, and while it may be compact in its desktop-friendly black, it certainly has a purposeful air about it, both in its chunky build and in the layout of the front panel. It may not be pretty, but it does look like it means business.

Measuring an accommodating 170mm wide and 55mm high – although quite deep at 290mm – and weighing just 3kg, the DHA V226 packs a lot in, being able to fulfil the functions of a fixed-output DAC to plug into a conventional amplifier, as well as those of a minimalist preamplifier, and, of course, a headphone amp. However, there are some limitations here: the only digital input is on a USB-C port [see rear pic, p77], with not a sniff of optical or coaxial connections, and while the headphone section is able to support both single-ended and balanced headphone designs, the analogue inputs and outputs are on unbalanced RCAs only.

THE CHOICE IS YOURS

Two sets of line-ins are also provided, with a front-panel flip-switch selecting between these and the DHA V226's USB-C input, while a similar selector lets you decide between using the headphone output, the line/pre output, or no output at all (mute). To the rear, a push-button selects between a fixed preamp output, or a variable level controlled by an Alps-branded attenuator and a 38mm knob made from the same aluminium as the thick casework, and which has a smooth, precise action.

> 'It powers along with an unstoppable '80s groove'

Built around a Cirrus CS43131 DAC chip, the digital section can handle PCM data up to 384kHz/32-bit and DSD to x4 (DSD256), with a front panel LED glowing green for PCM and blue for DSD. Meanwhile, the headphone output is available via four-pin XLR and 4.4mm Pentaconn balanced sockets, and a 6.35mm unbalanced output. However, while the power amplifier driving the headphone outputs may be balanced, the variable-gain preamp is unbalanced, with no option of connecting a balanced in/out chain direct to your power amp or active speakers. If you want to do that, you'll have to look further up the Violectric range, for example to the £2010 DHA V380, which offers balanced outputs (as well as adding coaxial/optical digital inputs and a USB-B connection for a computer or digital transport), or the £2910 DHA V590, which also has a set of XLR analogue inputs, and an AES/EBU digital in.

In addition to the front-panel controls, two sets of DIP switches on the rear, one for each channel, can set the preamplifier gain over a range of ±18dB in 6dB steps. This lets the DHA V226's output, and its volume control, be tailored to the headphones in use, without altering the gain of the discrete headphone power amp itself [see inside pic, below]. The latter's

RIGHT: Compact USB/DAC digital front-end [bottom left] joins analogue inputs in a variable-gain preamp [left] and substantial headphone amp with four pairs of discrete transistors per (balanced) channel [on heatsinks, bottom]

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LEFT: **Alloy volume rotary sits alongside toggles that switch between analogue and digital ins/line and headphone outs. The latter are on 6.35mm (unbal), 4.4mm Pentaconn and 4-pin XLR (bal)**

rated output is sufficient to drive all types, and is met in practice [see PM's boxout, below], this little amp being powered by a rather hefty toroidal transformer – at least by headphone amp standards!

POWER TO THE PEOPLE

Set to work, the Violectric DHA V226 gave a very good account of itself – I used a range of transports including iFi Audio's excellent little ZEN Stream unit and a stripped-back Mac mini computer, the latter giving me the choice of Roon or Audirvana Studio for music playback, fed by my two QNAP NAS devices. Moreover, the 'sound' of the DHA V226 was reliably solid whether used as a pure DAC into my usual amplification, connected direct to a power amplifier as a minimal-input preamp where its power amp section plays no part in the proceedings, or as a headphone solution.

In analogue-through mode, admittedly fed from my reference Naim ND555 network player [*HFN* Apr '19] and with the gain DIP switches set to their default 0dB, the DHA V226 provided the kind of transparency that gets fans of passive preamps rather excited, and bringing the onboard DAC into the equation did nothing to dispel this fine performance. For example, with Iiro Rantala's 2023 *Veneziana*, recorded live with members of the Berlin Philharmonic [Act Music ACT9971-2], the detail in all the instruments was striking. The balance between soloist and 'band' sounded beautifully natural, and the piano was well-weighted without any sense of it being spotlit or unnaturally forced forward.

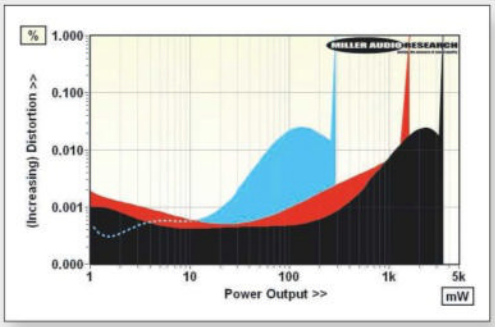
Yes, using the Naim network player/DAC into the DHA V226's analogue inputs delivered just that bit more 'pop' to the performance, with a more vibrant sense of the concert-hall ambience. However, via the V226's USB-C input and Violectric's own internal conversion, the plaudits far outweighed any reservations, even with a mix as dense as the good-time pop of 'Noel Groove' from Kaiser Chiefs' *Easy Eighth Album* [V2 Records Benelux; 44.1kHz/24-bit]. Meanwhile 'How 2 Dance' powers along with an unstoppable '80s groove courtesy of producer Nile Rodgers, who, while able to do this stuff in his sleep, still succeeds in adding to this set's retro appeal, which sounds more like Duran Duran in its pomp the more you listen.

HEADS UP

By this point I was confident the DHA V226 had proved its ability in its 'side hustle' as a DAC/preamp, so it was on with the cans ⟳

LAKESIDE ENGINEERING

The high ±25V PSU rails used within the DHA V226, and high >6V input overload threshold, ensure that the maximum *output* achieved by the headphone amplifier is independent of the (rear) gain setting. Distortion, however, does increase with the lower gain settings for a given output level – for example 0.002% versus 0.0008% at 100mW/32ohm with the 0dB and +18dB gain presets enabled, respectively. Power output is significant, either way, the 13.2V maximum output (1kHz/1% THD, via its single-ended 6.35mm socket) translating into 290mW driving high impedance (600ohm) in-ears and 3480mW/32ohm before 'falling back' to a mighty 1.45W/8ohm [see Graph, right]. The 250mohm output impedance is also usefully low, ensuring the V226/headphone system response is largely unaffected by swings in load impedance – it is flat from 10Hz-100kHz (±0.02dB). The default gain of the discrete output stage is +1.75dB (pre-gain set to 0dB) while the overall gain of the V226 can be varied from –16.0dB, –10.2dB, –4.3dB, +7.8dB, +13.7dB and +19.5dB (–18dB, –12dB, –6dB, +6dB, +12dB and +18dB pre-gain, respectively) to optimise the range of the volume control with headphones of very high to very low sensitivity. Even with the highest '+18dB' pre-gain, residual noise is still a low –92dBV (25µV) while the A-wtd S/N ratio is a wide 92.7dB (re. 1V/32ohm). PM



ABOVE: **Headphone power output into high 600ohm (blue), 32ohm (black) and very low 8ohm (red) loads**

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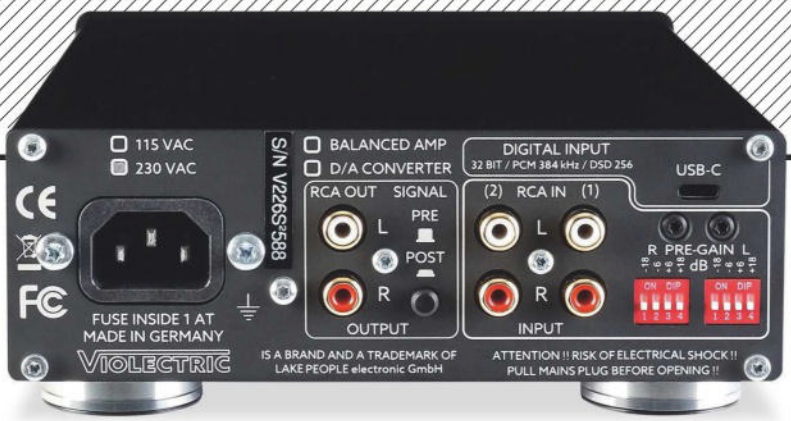

ABOVE: A tiny USB-C socket (to 384kHz/DSD256) is tucked away [top right] above DIP switches for setting the V226's 'pre-gain' [see boxout, p75]. Two single-ended ins and one out (on RCAs) are provided, the latter direct or via the pre-gain/volume stage

and time to examine how well it accomplished its prime directive. Lined up were various models, from the relatively easygoing Bowers & Wilkins P9 Signature [*HFN* Mar '17], with its big, bold but lush sound even at low levels, to the venerable and late-lamented planar magnetic Oppo PM-1 [*HFN* Jul '14] and Focal Spirit Pro [*HFN* Dec '15], the last of these being ruthlessly revealing but, in my experience, prone to sounding a bit brash if under-driven.

The review also coincided with the arrival of Austrian Audio's oh-so-cultured but also highly analytical The Composer headphone, albeit without the company's partnering The Perfect Score analogue headphone amp, which at the time of writing was still listed as 'arriving soon'. No matter: from the off, the headphones from Vienna proved a fine partner for Violectric's first-rung DAC/headphone amp, especially when hooked up via the balanced connection. This lent the pairing a useful uptick in grip and control to add to the mix of warmth and information in evidence through the usual single-ended 6.35mm socket.

LIGHT AND SHADE

For example, the lush sound of Rod Stewart and Jools Holland's take on 'Frankie And Johnny' from the pair's new *Swing Fever* set [Warner Records 5054197801686] has all the relaxed atmosphere of an extended set from the *Later...* TV show, but the amp and headphone pairing dug deep into the sound of the accompanying big band, revealing the great musicianship going on 'behind the scenes'. That insight extended to a fine view of the Czech Philharmonic/Semyon Bychkov recording of Smetana's *Má Vlast* [Pentatone PTC 5187203; 96kHz/24-bit download], with dramatic light and shade in the orchestra, and a real sense of presence and ambience. There were great sweeps of music, for example in the celebrated 'Moldau' section, but at the same time excellent instrumental timbres, from the silky strings and woodwind to the blare of brass, and the percussion sounded magnificent, really hitting hard when required. The result was a sound with exuberance *and* soul, enough to convert even the most steadfast 'speakers or nothing' merchant.

SOUND CONTROL

What, though, about the power on tap from the DHA V226? Well, yes, it will make even demanding headphones play louder than they, or your ears, will be able to stand, even though the sound remains clean and controlled at extreme levels. But the beauty of all that effortless power, plus those little DIP switches on the rear of the compact casework, is the controllability it brings to the user. Experiment a bit, and you can reach a setting giving you a decent range of adjustment on this amplifier's fine-feeling volume control, while retaining exceptional clarity and dynamics.

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

The potency here isn't focused on sledgehammers cracking nuts, but rather on letting the listener use almost any 'phones, from easy-drivers to the most demanding, without pause. Add in the flexibility of this design, its logical, studio-influenced controls, its ruggedness, and the no-nonsense air about the whole enterprise, and the DHA V226 emerges as a very desirable unit for the serious headphonista.

Sound Quality: 88%

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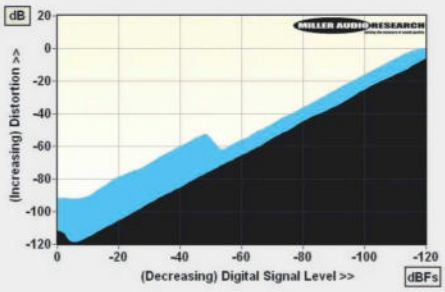
LAB REPORT

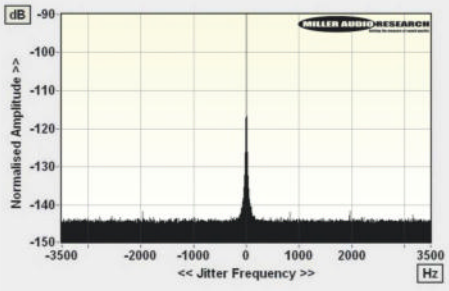
VIOLECTRIC DHA V226

Violectric has specified Cirrus Logic's CS43131 DAC (with USB-C interface) for the DHA V226 and various of its digitally-equipped pre/headphone amplifiers. This is a 384kHz/DSD256-compatible DAC that includes five addressable digital filters – linear phase, minimum phase and NOS types – of which Violectric has chosen the fast roll-off minimum phase option. This filter avoids the pre-ringing of a linear phase filter, traded for a non-linear group delay, but offers excellent stopband rejection of >96dB and 24dB with 48kHz and 96kHz media, respectively. Responses are flat and extended to within a tight ±0.02dB from 20Hz-20kHz and with sharp cut-offs of –1.4dB/45kHz and –3.0dB/ 90kHz with 96kHz/192kHz files, respectively. The underlying response of the pre/headphone amp is flat to within ±0.02dB (10Hz-100kHz)!

Maximum output from the single-ended preamp RCAs is a phase-positive 4.7dBV (1.72V) from a peak 0dBFs digital input – these outputs are not included in the ±18dB preamplifier section but still benefit from a vanishingly low 0.15ohm source impedance. The A-wtd S/N is a still-respectable 107.5dB, despite the reduced output, while low-level resolution is good to ±0.4dB over a full 110dB dynamic range. Distortion falls to as low as 0.000013%/1kHz over the top 10dB of its dynamic range but is ~30dB higher at 20kHz over the top 50dB of its range, after which there is a step reduction in 2nd/3rd harmonics and ultrasonic noise [see Graph 1, below]. Jitter is very well suppressed in this design with only a suggestion of low-rate phase noise seen as a broadening at the base of the J-test signal [Graph 2, below]. Correlated jitter is typically <10psec across all sample rates. For a full reveal of the Violectric's headphone amplifier performance, see our boxout [p75]. **PM**



ABOVE: Dist. vs. 48kHz/24-bit digital signal level over a 120dB dynamic range (1kHz, black; 20kHz, blue)



ABOVE: High-resolution 48kHz/24-bit jitter spectrum shows some phase noise but no correlated sidebands

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level / Impedance	4.7Vrms / 150mohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (line / USB)	92.7dB / 107.5dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.00005% / 0.002%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.0022% / 0.028%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/40kHz/90kHz)	–0.0 to +0.0dB/–1.4dB/–3.0dB
Digital jitter (48kHz / 96kHz / 192kHz)	<5psec / 5psec / 7psec
Resolution (re. –100dBFs / –110dBFs)	±0.2dB / ±0.4dB
Power consumption	10W
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	170x55x290mm / 3kg

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Copland
Appalachian Spring

A simple Quaker hymn is the key to a classic mid-century ballet, says **Peter Quantrill**, as he surveys recordings of both the chamber original and the orchestral suite

'The Gift To Be Simple', an old Shaker tune quoted and developed throughout *Appalachian Spring*, could be the motto for a major part of Copland's work. Copland could write hard-edged pieces with the best of them, and did so especially at the beginning and end of his career with works such as the *Vitebsk* piano trio of 1928 and the magnificent orchestral *Inscape* (1967). By contrast, his famous scores of the 1930s and '40s develop an aesthetic of simplicity and accessibility exemplified by *Appalachian Spring*, which he composed for the dancer and choreographer Martha Graham.

A pioneer and an authority on early music, Christopher Hogwood had an unlikely affinity for Copland

RURAL LIVING

The unassuming setting is a farmhouse in a pioneer settlement, but Graham and her company gave the first performance at the Library of Congress in Washington in 1944. Accompanied by a chamber ensemble of 13 instrumentalists, Graham herself danced the part of a newly married Pennsylvanian farmer's wife, the completion of whose house is the focal point for a joyous celebration of American rural life in the early 19th century.

The following year, Copland expanded the scoring to full orchestra. At the same time he cut out some transitional passages and entirely omitted the appearance of a hell-and-damnation revivalist minister (danced by Merce Cunningham at the premiere), who warns the young couple about the trials that fate might have planned for them. That episode had originally interrupted the set of variations on *Simple Gifts*, introducing both tension and turbulence at a crucial point and making the return of the hymn-tune in the final pages that much more striking and moving.

> 'We now have four versions of varying authenticity'

Other hands have since orchestrated and reinstated Copland's cuts, leaving us with four versions of varying authenticity: the full ballet in both chamber and full-orchestral versions, and his Suite in the same two instrumentations. As a measure of its immediate impact and popularity, the orchestral suite received four studio recordings within a decade of the premiere. (Could that be said of any other piece of classical music?) Conducted by names still well known (Serge Koussevitzky) and much less so (Arthur Rother, Fritz Litschauer and Howard Mitchell), these versions have long since disappeared.

MARK OF GENIUS

The early history of *Appalachian Spring* is documented instead by sonically compromised live recordings of the orchestral suite, led by Mitropoulos in New York and Celibidache in Berlin. And no, the Berlin Philharmonic of 1946 have no more idea what to do with Copland than you'd expect. Try to cast your mind back to a time when *Simple Gifts* was not ubiquitously familiar as an assembly hymn, a sticky ballad or a vehicle for ersatz-Celtic prancing (*The Lord Of The Dance*). To its first audiences, *Appalachian Spring* felt entirely new but comfortingly familiar – a mark of genius?

By the time the composer himself stood before a chamber group of session musicians in 1973, preparing to record the original complete ballet, he could begin by saying without false modesty, 'I assume everybody knows this piece'. CBS/Sony left us an invaluable 17-minute sequence of rehearsal excerpts, which has appeared once more in a newly remastered box of Copland conducting Copland.

More than any strenuous analysis, Copland's off-the-cuff comments tell you how the piece sounds, and should sound. 'A warm, soft sound, without any sense of effort. Not too much attack on each note. Watch out that we don't get too sentimental, it's a little on the Massenet side. Make it more American in spirit, more non-

John Wilson on Chandos: hauntingly sensitive to moments of magic

PHOTO: SIM CANETTY-CLARKE

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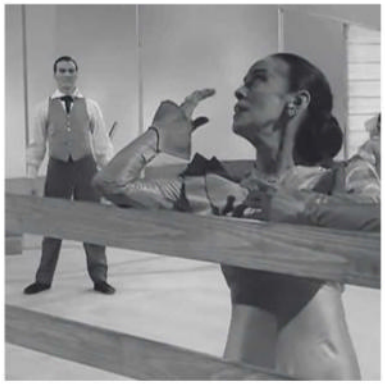
committal. This is passage-work, Miss Graham is dancing. The music by itself is warm, you don't have to help it. It's not so much a loudness as a bounciness that I'm looking for. Marcato but in a playful manner. We're not playing the *Sacre du Printemps*. It's meant to be light, bouncy, happy. *Amerikanisch*.'

NO GUESSING

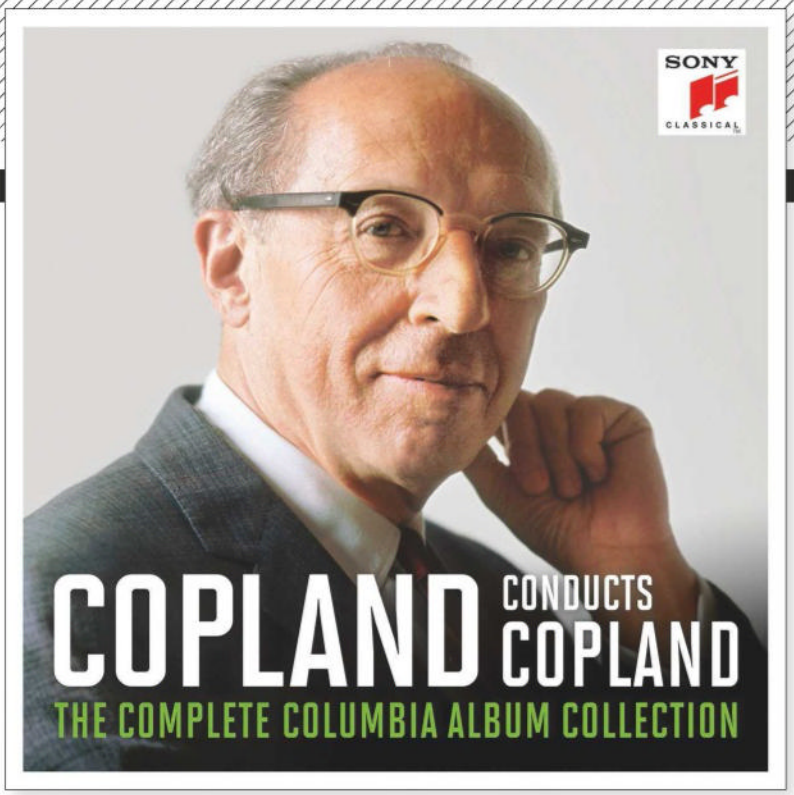
All the same, Copland the conductor serially betrays Copland the composer, being rhythmically disjointed despite his best efforts and evident intentions. 'Not together! Don't hurry! Why is that so hard, gentlemen, don't guess!' The most technically polished composer-conducted account is from 1970 with the LSO, but it's relative.

For many years, the version of the suite led by his friend Leonard Bernstein retained primacy in the catalogue. With all due acknowledgment of Bernstein's versatility, however, was *Appalachian Spring* truly his kind of piece? He made two recordings of it, for CBS and DG, and never quite shook off a species of beefy extroversion and Mahlerian intensity. 'More non-committal' was not a phrase in Bernstein's vocabulary.



The 1958 film of Martha Graham and company opens out Copland's score

In his own way, Copland knew exactly what he was doing, writing a half-hour folk ballet with 'spring' in the title. Mid-war, he spoke directly to his audience, and they heard what they needed to hear in its quiet affirmation of rural middle-American and tonal values, rooted in non-denominational spirituality. (When they needed a heroic story of perseverance and triumph a few months later, he gave them that too, in the Third Symphony). *Appalachian Spring* was embraced as an expression of American history and identity comparable to VW's *Tallis Fantasia* for the English.



Copland collectors and newcomers alike will want the new composer-conducted box from Sony

FAVOURITE PIECE

Even more than the rehearsal sequence, the 1958 TV film (on YouTube, and a Criterion DVD) of Martha Graham's company dancing *Appalachian Spring* brings the form and the gestures of the score to life. Eugene Lester accompanies with more sprightly tempi than usual, perhaps opening out some Stravinskian influence in the process (no bad thing). The painstakingly moulded modern versions by Slatkin (on Naxos) and Tilson Thomas [see Essential Recordings boxout, below] lose this narrative flow.

Back in the late '80s, the Orchestra of St Paul under Hugh Wolff recorded the complete original version (for Teldec) with near-ideal sympathy and precision. In its continued absence, try Christopher Hogwood in Basle. There's nothing especially authentic about the vibrato-lite playing, but authenticity cuts deeper than that.

If you can do without the preacher scene, then head for John Wilson on Chandos. Both of these conductors manage to make something magical from the return of *Simple Gifts*, which Copland calls 'my favourite place in the score. Not distant, not timid, sustain every note like an organ, no up and down bows, quiet and present'.

ESSENTIAL RECORDINGS

Basel CO/Christopher Hogwood
Arte Nova 82876506932
The complete ballet in the original chamber version: played, conducted and recorded with lucid, plain-speaking vitality.

San Francisco SO/Michael Tilson Thomas
Sony 82876658402, RCA 09026635112
Full ballet, full orchestra: affectionate tempi and impressionistic textures underlining Copland's mastery of orchestration.

Ensemble K/Simone Menezes
Aparté AP243
Suite, chamber version: taps into the homespun modesty and simplicity like few others, but in high-finish modern engineering.

BBC Philharmonic/John Wilson
Chandos CHSA5164
Suite, orchestral version: the Chandos engineering brings a wide-screen panorama to the open harmonies and sturdy dances.

Pittsburgh SO/William Steinberg
DG 4864442 (17CDs)
Suite, orchestral version: no-nonsense tempi from Steinberg, analytical Command Classics sound, newly remastered by DG.

Columbia CO/Aaron Copland
Sony 19439977462 (20CDs)
Complete ballet, chamber version: dry sound, even in a new remastering, patchy execution, but imbued with unique authenticity.

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STEVE SUTHERLAND

Steve edited NME from 1992-2000, the Britpop years, launching NME.com and reviving the NME Awards. Previously he was Assistant Editor on Melody Maker. Among his many adventures he has been physically threatened by Axl Rose, hung out awhile with Jerry Garcia and had a drink or two with Keith Richards...

Kate Bush
The Sensual World

This 1989 classic, now remastered on 180g vinyl, riffed on computer technology and James Joyce's *Ulysses* on its way to No 2 in the charts. **Steve Sutherland** listens in

It's October 1989 and we're chatting with Kate Bush on the occasion of the release of her sixth LP, *The Sensual World*. This is an album that not only sounds utterly sumptuous but, looking back on it now, appears to predict the spiritual and social upheaval we're entering today with the growth of artificial intelligence.

I mean, if an article I read recently is anything to go by, not only will 40% of the jobs humans currently do be usurped by AI in the very near future, with unpredictable consequences, the matter of what actually constitutes life itself might well come into question. 'After all, we are already doing everything we can to escape our biological existence', the writer claimed. 'Most people barely make use of the bodies they have, and many would be glad to be freed from bodies that are sites of disappointment and disgust.'

Perhaps, it teases, each of us is moving toward a non-material eternal life, the state of existence that religions have promised since the dawn of time – only now we have no need to actually die to get there.

OK COMPUTER

Without recourse to a brand new interview, we can't possibly know what Kate Bush would think of all that but listening to the pre-Internet *The Sensual World* it's evident that the relationship between technology and humanity was weighing heavily on her mind.

'We seem to be very much in the era of reason, and I think science is the ultimate example of that', Bush said back then. 'The other side is the instinctive, which is not logical on any level. Perhaps it's the putting together of the two... Maybe we've lost touch with our instincts, so it's become very important for us to work out logical explanations for things all the time, which I think is a bit of a shame, really.'

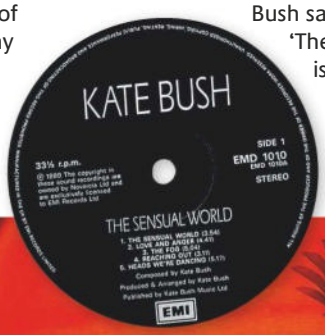
> 'She thought about leaving the title track off the album'

We're talking specifically about 'Deeper Understanding', the most extreme song on the album where the protagonist is so desperately lonely that (s)he's formed an addictive relationship with a computer. 'Wherever you live, chances are you won't know your neighbours', the singer explained. 'You won't even know the person who lives next to you. I suppose I really liked the idea of deep, spiritual communication – deep love which should come from humans – coming from the last place you'd expect it to, the coldest piece of machinery. And yet I do feel there is a link. I feel in some ways, computers could take us into a level of looking at ourselves we've not seen before.'

MORE THAN WORDS

The Sensual World, as its title suggests, is a gorgeous struggle to come to terms with some kind of acceptance that pretty much everything we thought we knew and pretty much every way we sought to communicate it was... well, if not wrong, then failing. The title track, for instance, does this thing that Bush has been doing since the start of her career, replacing words with sounds as if language isn't capable of capturing the emotion.

Meanwhile, in 'Love And Anger', she says, 'It's so deep I don't think that I can speak about it', as if language doesn't get to the heart of it. This is followed by, 'We could be like two strings beating/ Speaking in sympathy'. It seems music, rather than language, comes closer to expressing her emotions.



Kate Bush performing in 2014 at London's Hammersmith Apollo, label of the original LP (inset), and the singer in 1989 (right)

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Priced £37.99, the 180g reissue of Kate Bush's *The Sensual World* can be ordered online at *www.roughtrade.com*

'Words are sounds for me', she agreed. 'I get a sound and I throw it in a song and I can't turn it into a word later because it's actually stated itself too strongly as a sound. Like, in "Love And Anger", the bit that goes "Mmh, mmh, mmh" was there instantly and, in itself, it's really about not being able to express it differently. "Love And Anger" was an incredibly difficult song for me to write. In some ways, it's about the process of writing the song: I can't find the words; I don't know what to say. This thing of a big, blank page, it's so big… It's like it doesn't have edges around it, you could just start anywhere.'

JOYCE CHOICE

The title track is about Molly Bloom, the fountain of lust and life in James Joyce's dauntingly super-realist novel, *Ulysses*, another work that messes with the way we communicate. 'I just thought it was such an extraordinary piece of writing. It's such a beautiful style', said Bush. 'It's like trains of thought continually tumbling, tumbling speech, and not kind of… "stopped".'

Bush in 2011, the year she released her ninth studio album *Director's Cut*

'We'd written this piece of music in the studio, and I thought, "What about putting the Molly Bloom speech together with this?". So I went and grabbed the book, and it worked perfectly. It just scanned… the whole song. But, unfortunately, when I applied for permission to use the words, they wouldn't let me.'

This, admits Bush, was disappointing but not unexpected. 'It was completely their prerogative. They don't have to give their permission. But it was very difficult for me, then, to reapproach it.'

REACH OUT AND TOUCH

At this point she considered leaving 'The Sensual World' off the album, but with all the effort already put into the song ('the Irish musicians had worked so hard') she decided it should stay. 'It was a matter of trying to rewrite the lyrics so it kept the same rhythmic sense, because the words are so rhythmic; and to keep the sense of sensuality as well, without using the Joyce lyrics. So it all kind of turned into this piece where Molly Bloom steps out of the book into real life, where she can actually reach out and touch things. In a lot of ways, because of their lack of co-operation, it transformed the track into something else.'

The album itself also represented a transformation of sorts, according to the artist. On its predecessor, *Hounds Of Love*, Bush said she 'wanted to try and get across a sense of power, and the way I related to that was very much what I consider very good male music… There was this level of approaching the album, soundwise, that I think had a male energy.

'But I didn't want to do that on [*The Sensual World*]. I wanted to do it as a woman, not as a woman working around a man's world. *The Sensual World* was very much a chance for me to express myself as a female in a female way. That's the only way I can describe it.'

RE-RELEASE VERDICT

First released in 1989 by EMI on CD, cassette and vinyl [EMD 1010], this 180g reissue of *The Sensual World* is on Kate Bush's own label Fish People [FP6LP], and features a 2018 remastering of the album's ten tracks, from Bernie Grundman, James Guthrie and Joel Plante, on a single black vinyl LP. The sleeve features the original portrait shot of Bush, and 'Fish People' sticker. Also available is an 'Indie edition' [FP6LPX] on an 'ash grey' platter, with Obi strip. *HFN*

Sound Quality: 90%

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ABC *The Lexicon Of Love*

Topping the UK charts upon its 1981 release, the Sheffield band's debut album melded string arrangements with disco and funk, plus some Trevor Horn production magic. The result? Ten peerless pop tunes that looked at love through a cinematic lens...

Words: **Johnny Sharp**

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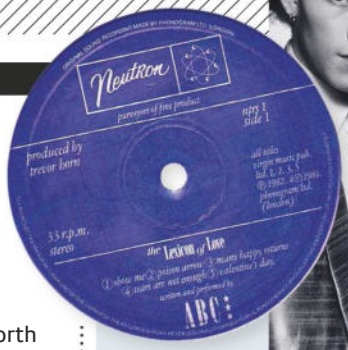
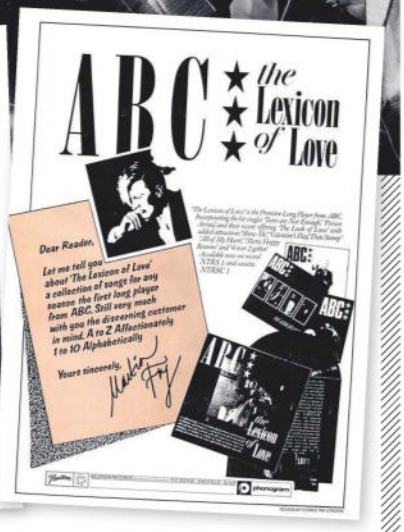


Side 1 of the original LP on the Sheffield-based indie label Neutron

The band (l-r): David Palmer, Martin Fry, Mark White and Stephen Singleton

Fry on stage with ABC at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, in 2014



Trade ad for the album from 1982

White and Fry pose for a press shot in 1987

Like a lot of bright, shiny things, ABC and their defining debut album, *The Lexicon Of Love*, were created out of something a good deal less glamorous. The grim-up-north narrative that is wheeled out as a backdrop to so much provincial punk and post-punk can be overstated, but there's no doubt that when Stephen Singleton and Mark White's avant-garde electronic outfit Vice Versa morphed into ABC with help from former fanzine writer turned frontman Martin Fry, they wanted to offer an escapist vision of pop for trying, recessionary times. They also rejected old school approaches to music-making.

ESCAPING THE STEEL CITY

'We wanted to separate ourselves not only from the world of rock 'n' roll and leather trousers, but also from Sheffield', Fry has since said, referring in the latter case to the scene in his adopted hometown (he's originally from Stockport) centred around the austere sounds of Clock DVA, Cabaret Voltaire and The Human League – before the last of those bands also turned their aesthetic gaze popwards.

'We were trying to fuse two worlds', Fry told the magazine *Classic Pop* in 2022. 'The worlds of Chic and Earth Wind & Fire with The Cure and Joy Division; black music with white music.' The former influences would emerge the clear winner as ABC created a new pop blueprint for the 1980s. And contrary to some versions of events, it was their creative offspring, not the work of a visionary producer. Although Trevor Horn, who they subsequently hooked up with, is given credit for revolutionising their sound and adding an all-important sonic polish, they'd already proved their chartworthy songwriting chops by the time the erstwhile Buggles and Yes man came on board.

Debut single 'Tears Are Not Enough' had been a Top 20 hit in the autumn of 1981, showcasing a bright, ritzy brand of horn-spattered groove pop that seemed to have one foot in the Britfunk scene populated by groups such as Freeez and Level 42, and another in the synthpop pretensions of the New Romantic movement. However, as Fry explained, 'At the core of it was a mentality that said, "Right, we want to take on the world". We were saying: "Pop music is this. It's polished, it's emotional, it's going to compete with Cole Porter and those guys"'.

> 'They wanted to offer an escapist vision of pop'

The band then enlisted Horn to produce their second single 'Poison Arrow' with a view to also working on the album it would form a part of, *The Lexicon Of Love*. Fry recalled, when speaking to *The Strange Brew* podcast in 2023, 'We said to Trevor that we wanted it to be as good as Earth Wind & Fire or Chic, all these brilliant disco records… the pocket, the beat, the rhythm'.

THE LYRICS OF LOVE

As well as having an eye on the dancefloor there was also a strong desire to bring romance back to pop music – to second, third and fourth that emotion. On that front, there seemed to be a gap in the art-pop market. Post-punk and the burgeoning indie scene seemed keen to steer well clear of matters of the heart, and even the New Romantics seemed to reserve the 'romantic' part of the equation for their costumes rather than their lyrics.

'A lot of people were writing songs about unemotional, sort of fake sci-fi versions of the future back then', Fry told *The Strange Brew*. 'We wanted to do stuff that was emotional, like a lot of the R&B we listened to but [with] a twist. "Poison Arrow" is a song about

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Photo of Fry and White used to promote *Alphabet City* from 1988

Picking up sticks – promo shot from 1982

Fry on stage in 2022 with composer and arranger Anne Dudley

Trevor Horn when with Buggles in 1982

Fry in 1997, the year the band released their album *Skyscraping*

PRODUCTION NOTES

Like all great producers, Trevor Horn knows not only how to get the best out of the musicians he works with, but who to call on to sprinkle some extra magic dust on a project. As he later told *Classic Pop* magazine, 'When they first played it to me, it was like a live band. They played it quite well… but I said, "Is that what you want or do you want it better?". And Martin Fry said, "I want it as good as it can possibly be". I said, "If you want it as good as it can possibly be, we'll have to start again. And this is what I propose we do…"'.

Horn's approach was to dissect each song into single notes, which he would then sample, whether it be a bass note, a cymbal or a horn stab, sequence then stitch them back together. Trusting that there was method in his madness, the band went along for the ride, but when Horn suggested ramping up the symphonic accompaniment, they needed persuading to go all the way.

'When Trevor said he wanted a full orchestra on "All Of My Heart", I said, "Well, hold on here – are we going to go full treacle?"', Fry later recalled. 'To which Trevor said, '"Bridge Over Troubled Water" had strings on it…' And I really liked Hall & Oates, which has that tradition, so…'

Entering the fray was Horn's go-to arranger Anne Dudley, then just 25, whose classical training helped lift

several tracks into the chamber pop stratosphere. 'We'd hang out', Fry told the *SuperDeluxeEdition.com* website, and I remember Trevor said, "Oh, this would be great if we put strings on it". Anne said, "I'm gonna go home tonight, and I'll put something together".

'She came in the next morning [with an orchestral arrangement] and that gave us all the confidence to book a string session in.'

how logically nasty it can get when somebody doesn't like you, doesn't love you. Or "The Look of Love"… It's not like what the songs say in Hollywood movies.'

SUCKER PUNCH

There are other lyrical elements that lend strong character to these songs, from the comparison in 'Date Stamp' between its protagonist's relationship prospects and supermarket sell-by dates ('I'm looking for a girl who meets supply with demand') to 'Valentine's Day''s juxtaposition of romantic theory with a more cynical reality ('With your heart on parade and your heart on parole, I hope you find a sucker to buy that mink stole'). Elsewhere, 'Many Happy Returns' uses the gift card platitude to evoke the bittersweet feelings provoked by an ex you can't move on from.

These lyrics, and their charismatic delivery from Fry, are one of several elements that set *The Lexicon Of Love* apart, and an area Trevor Horn insisted they work hard on, according to Fry. As he told *Classic Pop*: 'Trevor is one of the few guys I have ever worked with who was interested in the lyrics because sometimes you work with great people, but it's like, "Right, we've done the tracks. We'll leave you to do the vocals and we'll be back in two days' time"'.

'Trevor Horn's studio frills are relatively restrained'

All of this, plus the LP's title and the stream-of-consciousness splurge that adorns the sleeve ('still looking for a custom fit in an off the rack world?') lend credence to the idea that *The Lexicon Of Love* is something of a pop concept album. That's in the ear of the beholder, perhaps, but a bruised but unbowed romantic world view runs throughout its ten tracks. What's more, there are recurring touches of movie drama threaded through the aesthetic approach, whether it's that stylised sleeve, channelling West End Musicals and movie posters, or the spoken asides within the likes of 'Poison Arrow' and 'The Look Of Love'.

SOUL OVER STYLE

It also informs the soundtrack-esque sweep that accompanies so much of this record from the first majestic strings and horn fanfares of 'Show Me' to the thriller movie score of 'Valentine's Day', something that reflects the forensic

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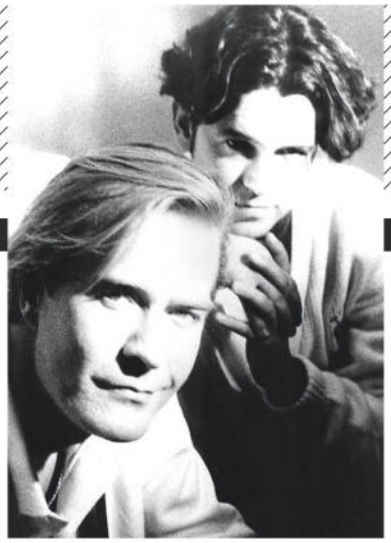
Alternate Format Discography



Fry and White in a promo shot for ABC's *Up* from 1989

attention Horn paid to production. The result is an album that still sounds startling as it romps from your speakers today, regardless of the anachronistic dressing that is sometimes noticeable.

For instance, the fretless bass sound flexing its muscles at every juncture during the opening track 'Show Me' could only come from the 1980s. Yet while the same proves distracting to a distracting degree on other pop from that era, here the songcraft cuts through and Martin Fry's gutsy vocal style remains a winner, always sounding soulful rather than stylised.

PUSHING THE ENVELOPE

Horn's studio frills are also relatively restrained, this release coming from before the era when he was pushing the production envelope to exotic new places with Frankie Goes To Hollywood and Art Of Noise. Nonetheless, he showcased an ability to include an array of sonic elements and give each equal billing. If they pop their heads boldly above the parapet at times – whether it's drum machine fills, the sparkling trills that ring out from the intro of 'Poison Arrow' or Mark White's percussive funk guitar rhythm on 'Tears Are Not Enough' – it all serves to drive the song more firmly into your consciousness.

The fact that Martin Fry was still talking about ABC's debut album, some 40 years after its arrival, is indicative of its 'lightning in a bottle' quality. The band would go on to have other significant hits – 'When Smokey Sings', the lead single from their 1987 release *Alphabet City*, is their best known song in the US – but none of their other long players compares. When you mention ABC, the conversation can only start with *The Lexicon Of Love*.

ORIGINAL VINYL

As piled-high, sold-cheap vinyl releases from this era go, the first physical incarnations of *Lexicon Of Love* presented the band's Technicolor vision impressively on black plastic [Neutron NTRS1]. Some listeners have found that the latter tracks on each side begin to suffer in quality on the original 1982 pressings, but on the whole it still stands up handsomely. What's more, it can be picked up in decent nick for only a few quid.

ORIGINAL CD RELEASE

Appearing in 1983, it's perhaps no surprise it was one of the earliest mainstream pop albums to see the light of day on a shiny silver-backed platter [Mercury 810 003-2, pictured below] as the LP was still selling well by the time major labels began to ramp up CD manufacturing in the early 1980s.

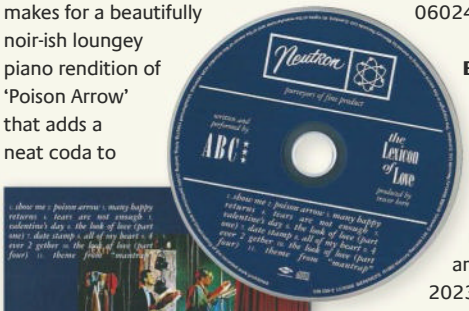
The limited run of discs it was afforded has rendered it a rarity for CD collectors (£80 or more for a mint copy). However, to be fair it doesn't have a lot to recommend investment thanks to pretty flat in-house remastering. One

dissatisfied punter has since called it 'the first CD release that sold me on the fact that CDs did not always sound better than vinyl'.

DELUXE REISSUES

In 1996 *The Lexicon Of Love* was repackaged [Neutron/Mercury 514 942-2] with six extra tracks and a Roger Wake remastering job that is punchy but hardly subtle – the softly symphonic opening on 'Show Me' no longer creeps slowly out of the speakers, for instance. Of the bonus tracks, the flute-flecked 'jazz mix' of 'Poison Arrow' is an interesting, if hardly essential curio, while the inclusion of an early demo of 'Tears Are Not Enough' reinforces the impression that ABC were close to glory even before Trevor Horn got his hands on them. An eight-minute 12in version of their live set's band-introduction jam 'Alphabet Soup', also sees our heroes venturing into full-on funk territory, though it's a place where they never quite sit comfortably.

While the 1998 reissue [Neutron/Mercury 538 250-2, pictured below] only has one of the extra tracks from the 1996 version, it's a worthwhile addition. 'Theme From Mantrap' makes for a beautifully noir-ish loungey piano rendition of 'Poison Arrow' that adds a neat coda to



the album (it's also the version you'll find on Spotify these days). Dick Beetham's mastering also offers more light and shade.

Want more outtakes and alternate mixes? The 31-track 2004 Deluxe Edition [Neutron/Mercury 9824373, pictured top right] is your one-stop shop. And before enjoying a 1982 live show you can ponder what in the heavens possessed ABC to record 'Into The Valley Of The Heathen Go' – an Iron Maiden parody dashed off during the album's demo sessions.

Of other new cuts, the demo of a Brit-funky take on 'Show Me' can't really compare to the final album incarnation and an early demo track, called 'Surrender', is a respectable effort but nothing more than B-side material.

AUDIOPHILE VINYL

ABC fans who remained loyal to the larger format had to wait until 2014 to enjoy a new vinyl pressing of *The Lexicon Of Love*, but when it finally arrived as part of Universal's Back To Black series [Neutron 378 941-8/UMG 0602537894185] its faithful, dynamic reproduction was warmly received. Just recently, though, this has been superseded by 2023's half-speed remaster by Miles Showell at Abbey Road Studios [Neutron NTRS401/UMC 0602445227396].

BLU-RAY AUDIO

For those who are happy to hop between hardware, *The Lexicon Of Love* motherlode also arrived in shops in 2023: a 4LP plus Blu-ray disc 40th Anniversary edition of the album [Neutron NTRS40X1]. As well as including the Abbey Road half-speed master of the original LP, three discs of extras are included in a lavish package, plus two Blu-ray platters. One of these has a hi-def presentation of the Julien Temple-directed short film *Mantrap* and several promo videos, while the other offers four new mixes overseen by remaster maestro Steven Wilson: Dolby Atmos, plus 96kHz/24-bit stereo, DTS-HD 5.1 and instrumental versions.

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Inside the Studio

PHOTO: AUDIO MIX HOUSE (LOGO REMOVED FROM SCREEN)

The Hideout, Nevada

After working with Ozzy Osbourne and Britney Spears, producer Kevin Churko acquired a studio in Vegas. **Steve Sutherland** on how he brought cutting-edge sound to Sin City

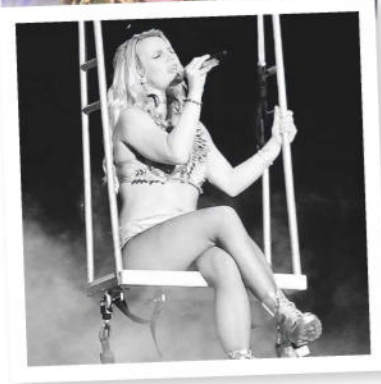
'We've had guys calling literally from gaol. They're getting out the next day and they're booking their time because, let's face it, they've had plenty of time to write their lyrics…' We're listening in to Kevin Churko who, apart from chewing the fat about The Hideout recording studio in Las Vegas, which he just happens to own, also has a bit of a personal history behind him.

He was born in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan into a musical family with whom he toured throughout his native Canada. Along the road, it gradually became clear that Kevin's first love lay with the recording process rather than performing.

'When I was ten, I was already doing sound-on-sound recording using two ghetto blasters and a tape deck', he said later. 'Then I convinced my brother Cory to split the cost of a Tascam 244 four-track cassette recorder, and we traded that for an eight-track Fostex reel-to-reel. I gained a lot of experience from my home recordings, but the recordings Cory and I later did in expensive studios always left me disappointed and feeling I could do better. I became such a pain in the ass for the studio guys that they would just say, "You do it, then".'

Studio A with its SSL Duality console and 800 square foot live room and (inset) The Hideout's owner Kevin Churko

Britney Spears performing in 2009 and (right) singing her single 'Don't Let Me Be The Last To Know' on stage in Argentina



MOUNTAIN HIGHS

Eventually Kevin and Cory found themselves recording at Vancouver's Little Mountain Studios, which Kevin described as an 'absolute thrill'. He then settled into a job at Torchwood Studios in Regina ('recording every-and-any band, from a polka band to heavy rock') while his brother nabbed himself a gig playing violin with Shania Twain's outfit.

KEY RECORDING TIMELINE

2005
Kevin Churko is asked to engineer Ozzy Osbourne's *Under Cover*, which helps launch his career

2010
Air Supply record *Mumbo Jumbo* in Studio A, using vintage microphones from Neumann, Schoeps and AKG

2014
Santana cut *Corazón* with guest singers that include Gloria Estefan, Ziggy Marley and Cindy Blackman

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One thing led to another and in 1999, when Twain's husband, the legendary producer Robert 'Mutt' Lange (AC/DC, Def Leppard and Muse among others) was on the lookout for an engineer, Cory recommended Kevin and the next thing you know he's over in Switzerland working with the maestro on an impressive bunch of tracks that troubled the top of the charts. This saw him get a credit on Britney Spears' incredible album *Oops... I Did It Again* for the song 'Don't Let Me Be The Last To Know'.

DARK MATERIALS

After four years of learning at the feet of the master, Churko was seduced by offers coming his way from LA and took up working as a studio hired hand while establishing his own recording facility at home. Business was good and when he looked to expand in 2005, the property prices in the area drove him east to Las Vegas where he opened his first Hideout studio.

Meanwhile, things took another turn in the right direction when he was asked to test out Ozzy Osbourne's home studio, The Bunker. Ozzy's producer at the time, Mark Hudson, then asked him to engineer Osbourne's covers album, *Under Cover*, which led to him being hired by Ozzy to engineer his tenth LP, *Black Rain*. Churko next returned to work on Ozzy's follow-up album, *Scream*, for which he co-wrote the majority of the material.

While neither *Black Rain* nor *Scream* could honestly claim much of a position in the hard rock pantheon (one critic labelled *Black Rain* 'embarrassing'), Kevin's close association with the Prince Of Darkness was more than enough to elevate his reputation and, sure enough, the headbangers came a-calling, and among their number was an upcoming local Vegas band called Five Finger Death Punch.

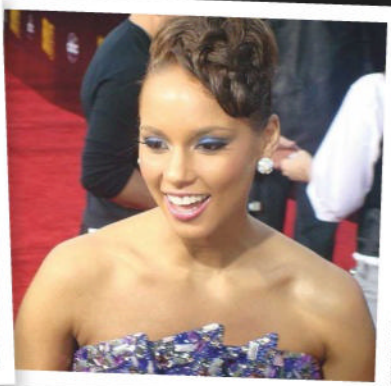
Kevin produced their second album, 2009's *War Is The Answer*, the follow-up, *American Capitalist*, the dual 2013 releases *The Wrong Side Of Heaven And The Righteous Side Of Hell* (Volumes 1 and 2), and 2015's *Got Your Six*. These were all done and dusted at Kevin's Hideout studio, which today can be found at 14 Sunset Way in the Henderson region of Las Vegas, Nevada.

Originally called Odds On Records & Studios before briefly trading as Audio Mix House, it announced itself as 'a $7 million multi-faceted recording facility that combines vintage flair with state-of-the-art technology'. Alicia Keys and Air Supply were the artists Odds On had boasted about using Studio A, which housed a 96-input SSL Duality console, the largest mixing console in North America. The facility was managed by Bobby Ferrari who'd been a session bass player and had set up a neighbouring studio, which was purchased by The Killers.

MAJOR PROJECT

In 2016, Kevin bought the complex and renamed it The Hideout. Today it features four recording areas that can operate separately or as part of one major project. As for Studio A, this is now purpose-built for tracking and mixing. Aside from the Solid State Logic (SSL) Duality console, it features an Ocean Way Audio monitor

PHOTO: AUDIO MIX HOUSE



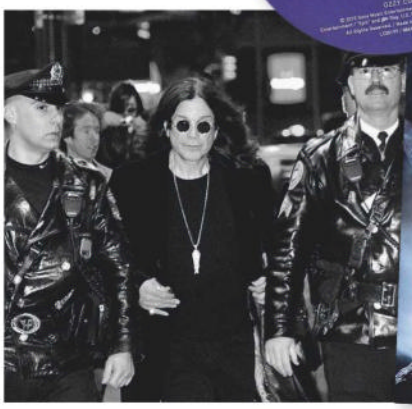
Cory Churko, guitarist, producer and brother of Kevin, pictured in 2019

Inside Studio B can be found an XL9080K Series desk from SSL with monitoring from Ocean Way Audio

Five Finger Death Punch lead singer Ivan Moody at the Rock am Ring festival in 2017

Alicia Keys on the red carpet as she attends the 2009 American Music Awards

Label and sleeve of *Scream* by Ozzy Osbourne, pictured here in 2010, the year the album was released. Kevin Churko co-wrote most of the material



2015
The Disturbed record *Immortalized* with Kevin Churko at the controls. The album sells over 1 million copies

2020
Slipknot singer Corey Taylor books time to lay down his first solo album, *CMFT*, and goes Top 20 in the UK

2023
Five Finger Death Punch announce plans to re-record their 2008 album *The Way Of The Fist* at The Hideout

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hi-fi news EDITOR'S CHOICE

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Hi-Fi Choice GROUPTEST WINNER

hi-fi+ WINNER 2023 — POWER BLOCK — PowerHAUS M6 mains block

hi-fi+ HIGHLY COMMENDED 2023 — USB CABLE — Signature Super ARAY USB

AWARD 2024 — Grand Prix — English Electric EE1

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PHOTOS: AUDIO MIX HOUSE

system, a live room, control room, stone drum room, two vocal booths, and a comfortable private lounge.

Studio B is a recording/mix room with a Solid State Logic XL9080K Series Console, Ocean Way Audio monitoring, an overdub booth and lounge. Studio C is for writing, editing, vocal editing and pre-production while, finally, Studio D is a hybrid recording and mixing room with facilities for creating Dolby Atmos sound.

Kevin is aided in running all this by his son, Kane, a Pro Tools expert and multi-instrumentalist. 'To me, production boils down to what you can do to impact what the listener hears', is Churko Senior's studio philosophy. 'All the technical stuff doesn't really matter as long as that person gets that feeling or gets that excitement from it. I'm constantly trying to think of techniques to spread out over different genres. I'm always trying to understand what makes people like something and what makes them not like it. The listener doesn't need to be conscious of all the stuff that's going on in the mix, they just need to hear the song and like, or not like it.'

> 'It's open to newbies and multi-million-sellers alike'

TAILOR MADE

Focusing on the talent, he says: 'I tailor a song to the client. Be it metal, rock, country, or whatever, a good song is a good song. I'll just say, "This could use a better chorus. Let's see what we can do". So I do this and that and see if they like it. Sometimes I do more, sometimes I do less. It's all in the service of getting the song at its best'.

The Hideout's other successes include *Immortalized* by Disturbed and Papa Roach's *Crooked Teeth*, both massive US hit albums and both produced by Churko. 'Artists will come in and say, "I need a song like one of your bands, so-and-so. Will you help me write that song?"', he says. 'My son Kane and I work in collaboration, and when we get one of those, we can start working it out ahead of time. It's almost "skeletoned" when the artist comes in for the fleshing out.

'Kane is a songster in his own right. He's already co-written some of the hits we've had, and has his own band, Modern Science. I work with Kane not because he's family, but because he's the best I could find. He brings a new generation's ideas and often he guides me along.'

OPEN PLAN

The studio's website sums it all up thus: 'The Hideout Studio is a truly full-service recording and production facility. We are old-school analogue and cutting-edge digital under one roof. This is a creative space with talented engineering and state-of-the-art equipment'.

What's more, it's open to newbies and multi-million-sellers alike, with costs calculated accordingly.

Jacoby Shaddix of Papa Roach performing at The Fillmore in Detroit and sleeve of *Crooked Teeth* (right) recorded at The Hideout

Pro Tools expert, producer and musician Kane Churko in 1986

Yamaha NS-10M monitor in Studio C, a pro model identifiable by its distinctive white cone

Studio D is used for recording, mixing and Dolby Atmos

On stage in 2017 – singer David Draiman of Disturbed

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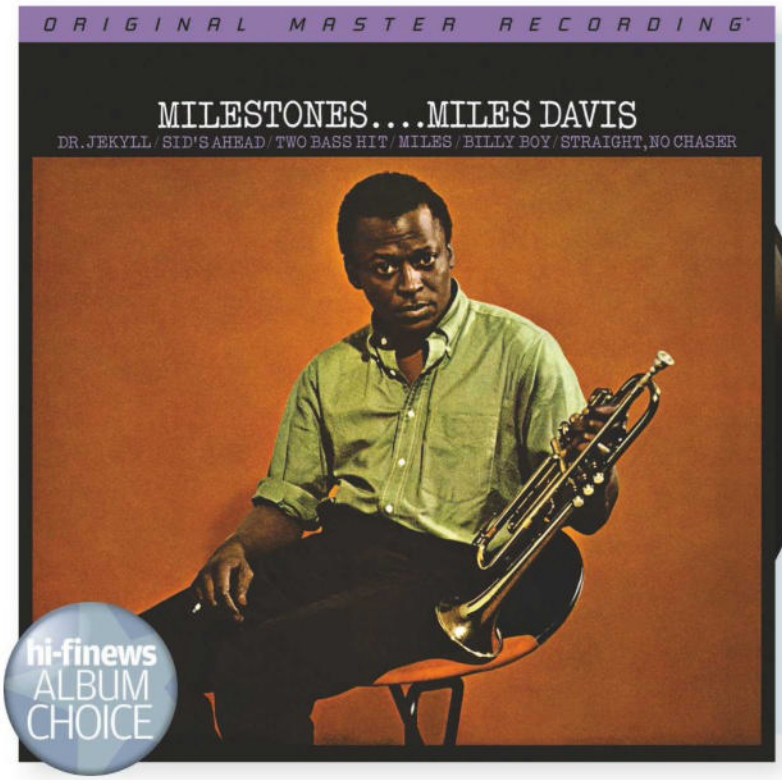
AUDIOPHILE: VINYL



MILES DAVIS
Milestones

Mobile Fidelity MSV1-528 (180g SuperVinyl)

In the wake of the *Thriller* controversy, every MoFi release is undergoing added scrutiny, but I defy anyone to dismiss this edition of Miles' 1958 masterpiece just because of the DSD256 stage in between the 15ips analogue tapes and the stunning, super-flat pressing. This is Davis with (for some) his greatest band, *ie*, Cannonball Adderley, John Coltrane, Red Garland, Paul Chambers and 'Philly Joe' Jones. Mono purists will be stunned by the post-2001 mix – in proper stereo and sounding almost as good as a One-Step. The content is beyond criticism, but I am awed by the reworking of the twee pop song 'Billy Boy' – and I would love to know what Monk thought of the divine 'Straight, No Chaser'. *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - 100

JETHRO TULL
The Broadsword And The Beast

Chrysalis 5054197534270 LP

If you were overwhelmed by the 8-disc 40th Anniversary box set of this album [*HFN* Jan '24], or you 1) prefer vinyl and 2) want only the original contents rather than loads of extras, this has just the 1982 track list, remixed by Steven Wilson. A glorious 12x12in booklet has been culled from the box's epic saga, but the reason for wanting this disc is the sound: rich and massive. Musically, it's standard Tull, no surprises, but it stands out for being produced by ex-Yardbird Paul Samwell-Smith, who rendered it more subtle than most JT releases. That has led to an amount of controversy, so the caveat is that this is more for devotees than newcomers. Me? I loved it. *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - 100

PENNY ARKADE
Not The Freeze

Sundazed LP5591 (two LPs coloured vinyl; mono)

Yet another lost treasure which makes you wonder about the record labels' and the public's taste. This now-forgotten 1960s LA group, mentored by The Monkees' Mike Nesmith, produced a cornucopia of all-original compositions embodying West Coast pop, psychedelic and folk-rock memes, with fans of the decade recognising hints of The Turtles, The Byrds, Buffalo Springfield, Sopwith Camel and Moby Grape, but equally some of the influential harmony bands of which the UK produced so many, from The Searchers to The Hollies. This set in glorious mono contains their only album plus 13 demos and early versions previously on a now-rare CD. *KK*

Sound Quality: 85%

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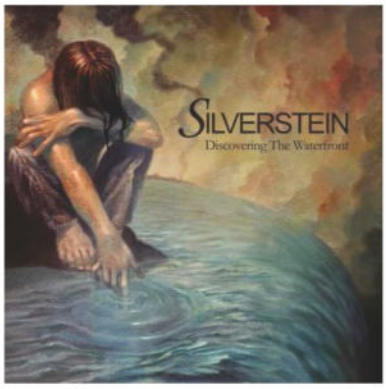

SILVERSTEIN
Discovering The Waterfront

Craft Recordings CR00400 (180g vinyl)

Treating an emo/post-hardcore group to audiophile-grade pressings begs a number of questions, mainly rhetorical, *eg*, why are so few post-Millennials buying into sound quality? It's because much of their preferred contemporary music simply doesn't warrant it. This LP from 2005 consists almost entirely of a hoarse-throated, meters-not-moving wall of thrash, save for the odd bit of introspection, but who can argue with its sales of better than a half-million copies? I'm sure Craft has a reason for bestowing upon this an immaculate pressing, while the percussion and bass are something to behold, but it's like using a Zalto wine glass for drinking Red Bull. *KK*

Sound Quality: 85%

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MARSHALL CRENSHAW
Field Day

Yep Roc Records YEP3058X

As is expected of cult artists, Crenshaw has vaults full of amazing unreleased stuff, and he's taken the opportunity presented by anniversaries to thank his fans with bonus tracks on reissues. Matching last year's celebration of his eponymous debut, this magnificent birthday CD of his sophomore release adds six tracks consisting of alternates and B-sides, the quality of which match the main album. For those not familiar with Crenshaw, he was part of a 1980s subgenre that offered a loving look back at the '60s – not least the British Invasion – a bit like The Knack without the attitude. Every song is worthy of the not-dissimilar Elvis Costello or Nick Lowe. *KK*

Sound Quality: 85%

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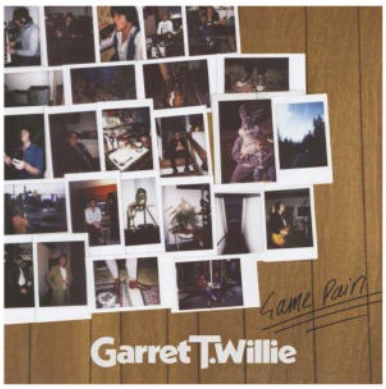

GARRET T. WILLIE
Same Pain

Garret T Willie Records/The Orchard Distribution GTW006

It's been decades since the last revival of gutbucket blues and 1950s rock 'n' roll and rockabilly, when resuscitated by bands like The Fabulous Thunderbirds, The Stray Cats and Rockpile. In the late-1970s and early-'80s, they presented a backlash against wussy glam-rock and miserable post-punk; for 23-year-old Garret T. Willie (who could only ever be a roots rocker with a name like that!), it's as if the call has gone out again. He's a counter to those seemingly introspective or sensitive types like Ed Sheeran, Sam Smith, *et al*, delivering truly raw stuff. He's heavy on the Stevie Ray-style guitar, and his vocals clearly needed work, but it's as genuine as it gets. *KK*

Sound Quality: 85%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100

THE WHO
Who's Next/Life House

Polydor 3585826 (two discs)

After recovering from the shock of finding out The Who's long-awaited release of the aborted *Life House* album was going to be an 11-disc set costing over £200, I settled on the 2CD alternative. This 50th anniversary reissue gives you the superbly remastered *Who's Next* and a dozen tracks including singles, demos and live material, plus a booklet with a condensed telling of the story. *Life House* is to The Who what *Smile* was to The Beach Boys, an unrealised project which entered rock lore, so this partly solves the mystery. As *Who's Next* is for many their finest moment, the extras ultimately are secondary. Suffice it to say, this is a must-have CD for Who fans. *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100

STEELY DAN
Can't Buy A Thrill

Analogue Productions CAPP134 SA

To avoid confusion, given that the Dan's stunning debut was reissued last year in a couple of vinyl forms including UHQR, the whole point of this release is Analogue Productions demonstrating its commitment to SACD. For this listener, it's the best digital format I know of outside of the higher-res rates found only in professional situations, and I'm hard-pressed to find fault with this disc, even when auditioned side-by-side with the LPs. The sax break in 'Dirty Work' and the vocals throughout are enough to convince any who have been undecided about embracing SACD, which survives in spite of its relative obscurity. For now, this is the *only* way to enjoy Steely Dan if you've forsaken vinyl. *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%

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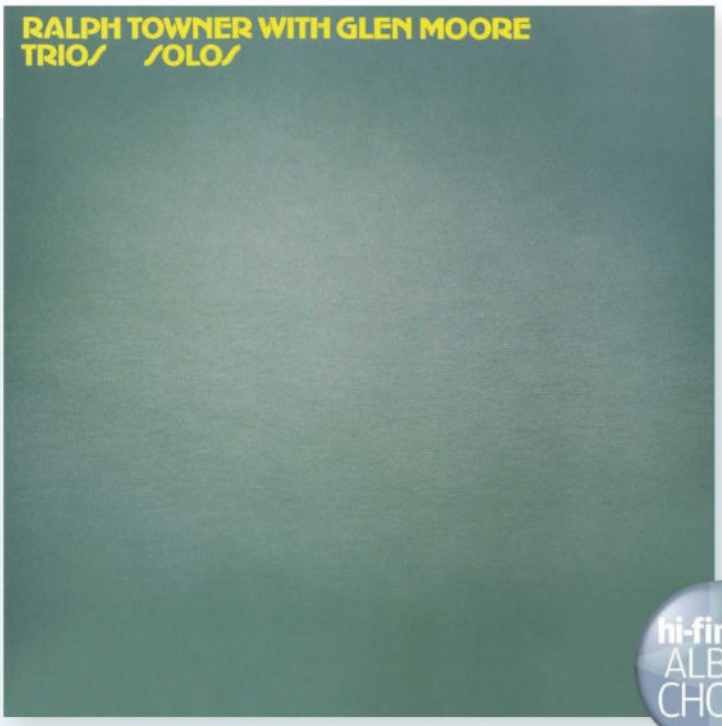
HI-RES DOWNLOADS



RALPH TOWNER WITH GLEN MOORE

Trios/Solos (96kHz/24-bit, FLAC; WAV)

www.ecmrecords.com; ECM 1025

This 1972 album is unmistakably a period piece, with more than one lapse into 'of its time' self-indulgent noodlage, but it still sounds superb in this ECM transfer from analogue tape to 96kHz/24-bit files. In fact, this was the now-84-year-old guitarist's debut for the label, partnered with the members of his band – oboist Paul McCandless and tabla player Colin Walcott appear here and there, but bassist Glen Moore is an omnipresent driving force. For every dreamy head-swayer there's a more direct track such as '1x12', while the cover of Bill Evans's 'Re: Person I Knew', with Towner on both guitar and piano and deft bass from Moore, is simply gorgeous. Yes, it's probably what many would describe as a 'very ECM album', but it's hard to argue with the musicianship on display here, or the sheer quality of the recording, allowing all concerned to shine and producing truly demo-worthy sonics. *AE*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100

SKINNY LISTER

Shanty Punk (96kHz/24-bit, WAV)

www.xtramilerecordings.com; Xtra Mile Recordings XMR184

For reasons far too complex to go into here, I've been listening to plenty of shanties of late, and while I'm neither a *piscatoris amicus* nor a habitual gansey-wearer, I admit to considerable enjoyment of this album. It's the sixth by London band Skinny Lister, formed after meeting at a folk club in Greenwich almost 15 years ago. Despite being a polished product, *Shanty Punk* has all the vitality of the second set of the evening, when a band wants to get the audience up and joining in. All 11 tracks are originals, but sound like they should be standards everyone will know, and have just the right raucous energy to come up fresh on repeated listening. Fisherman's Friends it isn't, and shanty purists may not approve, but having recently encountered another shanty outfit offering covers of 'Uptown Funk' and 'Wannabe' in its set, clearly anything goes – and this one is a blast. *AE*

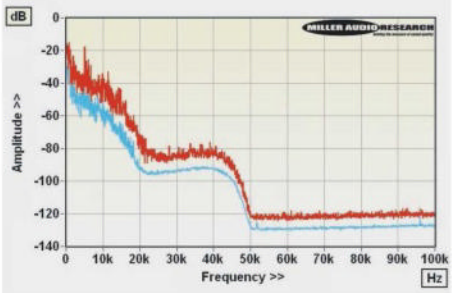
Sound Quality: 85%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100

OUR PROMISE

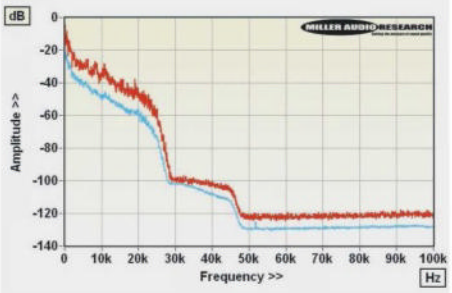
Following our Investigation feature [*HFN* Jun '11] where we examined the claimed quality of 'high-res' downloads, *Hi-Fi News & Record Review* continues to measure the true sample rate and bit-depth of HD music downloads. The Graphs show peak [red] and RMS [blue] spectra. These unique reviews will be a regular source of information for those seeking new and remastered recordings offered at high sample rates and with the promise of delivering the very best sound quality. (Note: an asterisk in the heading denotes a technical reservation – see Lab text). **PM**

LAB REPORT



This 1972 analogue recording, digitised at 96kHz/24-bit via a Studer A820, has peaks ranging from –6.8dB to –1.0dB and a far wider dynamic range than most new *digital* recordings we see! The ~20kHz bandwidth is set by the master tape. PM

LAB REPORT



Receiving a 'mastering polish' at Abbey Road Studios this folk/punk set punches its way to peaks of –0.3dBFs on all tracks. Dynamic range is squeezed and while the final file is at 96kHz, the 28kHz response hints at some analogue intervention. PM

https://worldmags.net

JEFF BABKO, TIM LEFEBVRE, MARK GUILIANA

Clam City (96kHz/24-bit, WAV)*

www.samfirstrecords.com; Sam First Records SFR-004

While this set, recorded by pianist Babko, drummer Guiliana and bassist Lefebvre live at LA's Sam First cocktail lounge/jazz club/recording studio, certainly swings, it seems to have something of an identity crisis. Five of the eight tracks are from an album called *Clam City*, three have no title metadata, and the info sheet from the label is entitled *Clam City* but refers to the title as *Calm City*. Anyway, despite PM's surprise at the midstream change in sampling rate and bit depth [see Lab section, below], this set has an immediacy to its sound that's hard not to like, opening gently with 'The Church Of Bill Hilton' on piano before the rhythm section kicks down a gear and drives harder, a trick the trio employs on more than one further occasion. This isn't the most demanding jazz album you'll ever hear, but the time passes agreeably enough. *AE*

Sound Quality: 80%

0 - - - - - - - - 100

NOTILUS

II (44.1kHz/24-bit, WAV)

www.denovali.com; Denovali DEN378

Quite possibly not named after the way their countrymen pronounce the name of Captain Nemo's submarine, French quintet Notilus is one of those outfits whose sound defies simplistic classification. One minute it's woozy brass, the next – or more often than not, at the same time – it's a dubstep beat or other echo of dance culture. Then there's the phasey production and grinding synth-bass lines not so far from Kraftwerk's evocation of passing traffic, all adding up to an album where every turn is a surprise. The big centrepiece is 'Dool', epic in scale – and in length at 8:37 – yet driven by a dubby beat that holds the attention. And then, just when you think you've got the mark of this outfit, it throws a metaphorical 'bof', no doubt with a shrug, and wanders off into the ambient 'Descent-Memories-Ascent' sequence that closes the album. It's all a little bit odd, but really rather wonderful. *AE*

Sound Quality: 80%

0 - - - - - - - - 100

HILARY GARDNER

On The Trail With The Lonesome Pines (48kHz/24-bit, WAV)

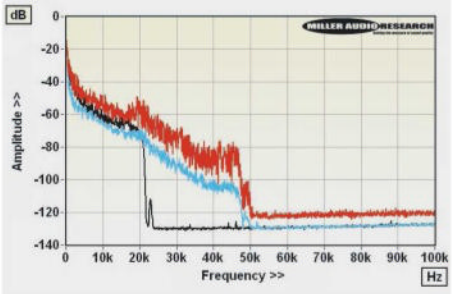
www.anzicrecords.com; Anzic Records ANZ–0089–02

If you find yourself putting your tongue up into the roof of your mouth and making the 'clip clop' sound of a faithful nag treading the long path while listening to this album, don't be surprised – Gardner's lockdown project was this collection of 'trail songs'. Canyons call, the moonlight plays on the river at night, and yes there are the inevitable ''lil dawgies' in there somewhere as the album meanders through the nostalgia of its lonesome dozen tracks, complete with reverberant guitars, brushed skins, and the whole shebang. It's all very what Americana was before it was a thing, but in creating its artificially aged sound, the production seems to have paid tribute to the deficiencies of old recordings: there's distortion rather than those archetypal soft guitars, and Gardener's voice is curiously recessed at times. Pity, that... *AE*

Sound Quality: 75%

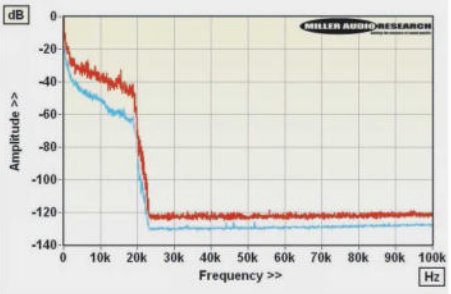
0 - - - - - - - - 100

LAB REPORT



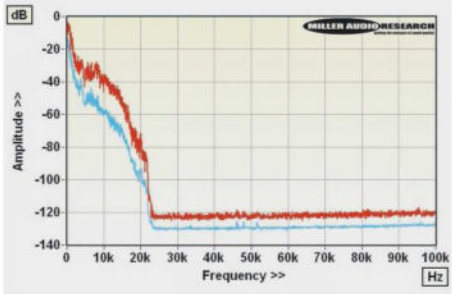
Recorded live at Sam First, the first three tracks here are at 96kHz/24-bit while trks 4-8 [black spectrum] are at 44.1kHz/16-bit (CD). Peaks are typically at or below –1dBFs while the CD files have slightly better dynamic range. **PM**

LAB REPORT



Although this is a 24-bit recording – the 20kHz response limited by the 44.1kHz sample rate – all tracks show peaks above –1dB. Moreover, with peak-to-RMS ratios of between 8-10dB, the available dynamic range is not well used. **PM**

LAB REPORT



Every track on this 48kHz release is normalised to a high –0.4dB and while dynamic range is adequate there's compression on Hilary's vocal. Given the nature of this 'historical document' this might be deliberate scene setting! **PM**

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THE BEVIS FROND

Focus On Nature

DOMINO FIRECD743; LP: FIRELP743

Nick Salomon has been leading The Bevis Frond from the front since 1986, playing flamboyant lead guitar with liberal use of effects, in a way that evokes the progressive psychedelia of Jimi Hendrix, the heavy blues of The Groundhogs and the grunge-rock of Dinosaur Jr. He is going through a prolific patch. His 2021 album *Little Eden* examined the state of the nation, looking for positives, and these 19 songs range from his role as a musician on 'Mirror' to a look back at '70s nightlife on 'Mr Fred's Disco'. But the focus is on our mismanagement of the planet, and when he warns us that we need literally to 'cool it' on the opener 'Heat', the unadorned vocals, incisive lyrics and power trio energy all combine to give a poignant effect. *MB*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - 100

TY SEGALL

Three Bells

Drag City DC841CD; LP: DC841

It's instructive to note that West Coast American singer and multi-instrumentalist Ty Segall is a fan of both Harry Nilsson and Hawkwind, two musical approaches that just about form a yin-yang balance on this, his 15th solo album. 'My Best Friend' is a hook-laden paean to his two dachshunds – an update of Nilsson's 'The Puppy Song', perhaps? 'Watcher' has a sweet, breezy vocal melody with acoustic picking and a keening guitar hook, but Segall's music has a restlessness about it and an edginess that breaks out spectacularly on 'Eggman'. Here his explosive guitar playing almost buckles the song structure before it ends in an abstract sonic pile-up. *MB*

Sound Quality: 85%

0 - - - - - - - - 100

SHEHERAZAAD

Qasr

Erased Tapes ERATP164CD; LP: ERATP164LP

Sheherazaad is an American artist of Indian descent, brought up in the San Francisco Bay Area, and in her music she examines her position within American society and her need to establish a sense of her roots. She sings mainly in Hindi, and on 'Mansoor' her remarkable voice drifts across acoustic guitar lines – at times reminiscent of flamenco – before curling into delicious melismas. 'Dhund Lo Mujhe' is similarly spacious with pizzicato string patterns and flourishes, while slide guitar adds to the atmosphere on 'Koshsish', and piano on 'Khatam'. Sheherazaad describes *Qasr* as a 'folk-pop synthesis', even a bit 'new age', but it's a lot more besides. *MB*

Sound Quality: 85%

0 - - - - - - - - 100

THE JESUS AND MARY CHAIN

Glasgow Eyes

Fuzz Club FC226CD; LP: FC226V12GR

As mid-'80s *enfants terribles*, brothers Jim and William Reid allied primal rock 'n' roll with feedback guitar racket, their confrontational gigs provoking crowd trouble. Things have calmed down now but Jesus And Mary Chain still nod back to The Ramones, The Beach Boys and The Velvet Underground, and the eternal formula of simple chord changes shaping pop melody. Over William's terse guitar lines, Jim wryly sifts through rock history, citing their influences on 'The Eagles And The Beatles', becoming self-referential on 'jamcod', and sounding particularly world-weary when describing young people having fun over the squelchy synths of 'Discotheque'. *MB*

Sound Quality: 80%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100

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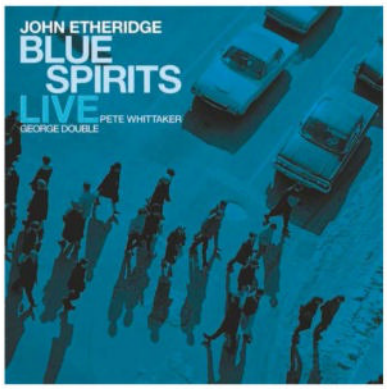


JOHN ETHERIDGE BLUE SPIRITS

Live

Dyad Records DY033

While fronting Soft Machine through its decades of reunions and in its current revival, virtuoso guitarist John Etheridge has worked with many greats in many genres, and for 20 years he's also led the trio here. With organist Pete Whittaker and drummer Geoff Double, there are lots of pyrotechnics and plenty of variety. Mal Waldron's 'Soul Eyes' is a lush ballad, but there's some fiery fusion, not to mention Etheridge's take on Stevie Wonder's 'Cause We've Ended As Lovers' and a country excursion to Hank Williams's 'Cold Cold Heart', before a well-paced set ends beautifully with Mingus's 'Goodbye Pork Pie Hat'. Blues, jazz and rock in a special blend. *SH*

Sound Quality: 80%

0 - - - - - - - - 100

LIV ANDREA HAUGE TRIO

Ville Blomster

Hubro HUBROCD2659; LP: HUBROLP3659

After studying at the Norwegian Academy, being inspired by Keith Jarrett, and making an impression with the six-piece Ladybird Orchestra, pianist Hauge joined the Europe Jazz Footprints scheme. Touring followed and her new trio gelled on the road; an initial home-recorded album is now followed by this one (*Wild Flowers*). On 'Golden Rain', with an engaging theme and tumbling rhythm, forthright bassist Georgia Wartel Collins takes the lead, while later the freeform 'You And Me Baby' is a feature for drummer August Glännestrand, bringing a hint of hip-hop. But Hauge has great melodic sense and her light touch makes her music fresh and appealing. *SH*

Sound Quality: 85%

0 - - - - - - - - 100

RADHIKA DE SARAM

From The Crow's Nest

Rainy Days Records RAINY019CD; LP: RAINY019LP

Classically-trained de Saram is firstly a violinist, but a few years ago, after seeing Russian-born saxophonist Zhenya Strigalev and his trio, she bought a bass guitar. She then wrote the music for this first album, its title reflecting the lockdown stasis, the pieces invoking her Sri Lankan heritage along with urban influences. The recording was made in St Petersburg in 2021 but mixed in London, Strigalev himself the main soloist, his usual hard-bop idiom happily taking on an eastern tinge. There is wild synth from Elliott Galvin, but also heard are Russians Rodion Grischenko (guitar), Evgeny Ponomarev (keys) and Garry Bagdasaryan (drums). A great debut. *SH*

Sound Quality: 85%

0 - - - - - - - - 100

CHARLES LLOYD

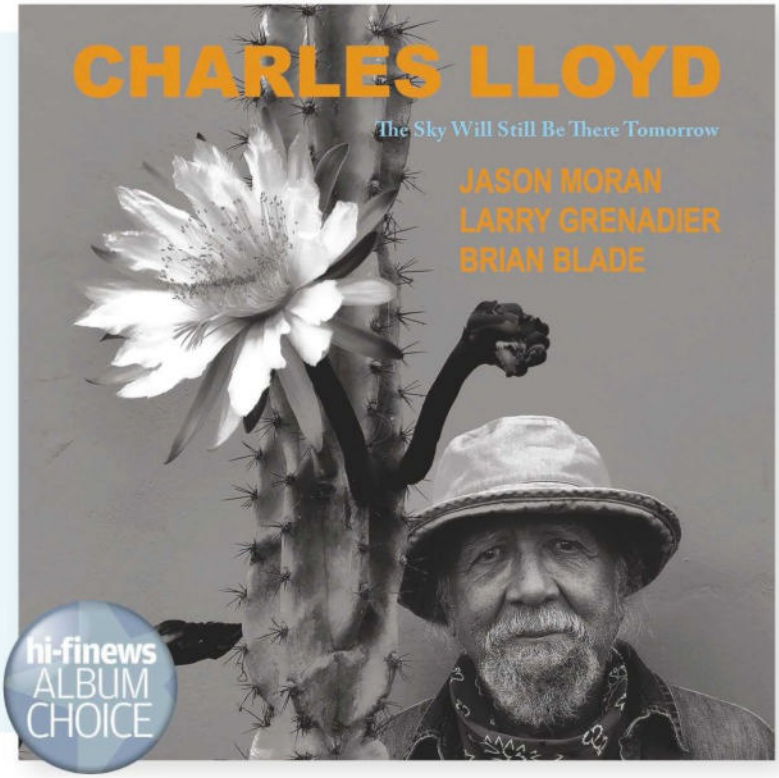
The Sky Will Still Be There Tomorrow

Blue Note 5816794; LP: 5816796 (two discs)

In 2022, the saxophonist offered *Trio Of Trios*, three albums with different musicians each time. But Lloyd had already conceived the new super-quartet that convened to record this double album in early 2023, around the time of his 85th birthday. All the players have long associations with Lloyd, pianist Jason Moran featuring on *Rabo de Nube* in 2008, bassist Larry Grenadier and drummer Brian Blade on 1999's *The Water Is Wide*, for example. Along with new pieces like the optimistic, jauntily bluesy title track, Lloyd revisits and reworks earlier originals, as with the opening 'Defiant, Tender Warrior'. Astonishing that an artist who made his name in the 1960s could still win polls in the 2000s, but deservedly so. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - 100



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MAJESKI, O'NEILL, DALAYMAN, LSO/RATTLE

Janacek: Kátya Kabanová

LSO Live LSO0889 (two discs; downloads to 192kHz/24-bit resolution)

Opera in concert is rarely so immediate, and LSO Live recordings have long overcome the acoustic limitations of the Barbican. In the title role, Amanda Majeski is an ideal Janáček heroine, vulnerable and resilient, astonishingly radiant in her top register: she is Katya the way Callas was Tosca and Hotter was Wotan. Katarina Dalayman sings the cruel Kabanicha as a woman trapped by circumstance no less than Katya; everyone is cast to wring the last drop of feeling from the piece. Rattle's direction brings revelatory focus to the Czech-verismo idiom, more expansively paced than Mackerras [Decca], building towards a tragic climax worthy of *Grimes* and *Wozzeck*. The booklet has an essay, synopsis, libretto and translation. *PQ*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - 100

LEONSKAJA, LUCERNE SO/SANDERLING

Schumann, Grieg: Piano Concertos

Warner Classics 5054197837838 (downloads to 96kHz/24-bit res)

Leonskaja has seemingly never recorded these concertos, yet these new studio accounts radiate decades of familiarity with their inner workings. She distinguishes Grieg from his model by giving his more fragile lyricism the space to ripple across the barline, and the recording balances her true *pp* dynamics with some intriguing ideas in the accompaniment. Her playing 'speaks' more than ever with the weighted directness of Fischer-Dieskau, always telling a story but alert to its context. Her Schumann embraces Beethoven in the near past and Brahms in the even closer future, giving the piece an unfashionable but compelling heroic profile. *PQ*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - 100

MAGNIFICAT/PHILIP CAVE

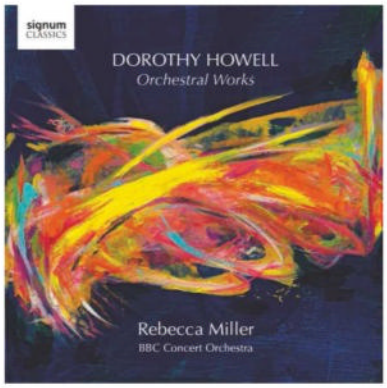
Lassus: 'The Alchemist', Volume 1

Linn CKD660 (two discs; downloads to 96kHz/24-bit res)

Lassus and his contemporaries produced Magnificats the way Haydn and Mozart wrote symphonies and sonatas, as a functional demonstration of their versatile genius as practical creative musicians. Each of the 14 settings here is based on a different madrigal, whether by Lassus or an Italian contemporary. Prefacing the Magnificats with the madrigals elucidates this relationship while varying the textures. The annotations go a long way to linking them and bringing them to life: so do these elegant and unforced performances, one or two voices per part, maybe sounding nothing like the male choirs of Lassus's time but none the worse for that. *PQ*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - 100



BBC CONCERT ORCH/REBECCA MILLER

Howell: Lamia, Koong Shee, The Rock, *etc*

Signum SIGCD763

The music of Dorothy Howell (1898-1982) won serious attention in the 1930s and '40s. Does it reward curiosity now? Yes, if extravagant claims for its originality are resisted. The entry points of familiarity lie abroad, in Sibelius, Respighi and French-period Delius; her approach to form is piecemeal and illustrative, sensitively tailored to her subject. *The Rock* is a sketch of Gibraltar; *Lamia* describes an Ovidian metamorphosis after a Keats poem; the *Koong Shee* ballet is a piece of willow-pattern Chinoiserie. Three brief *Divertimenti* also have their striking moments. A larger ensemble and closer recording would help, but Miller directs well-sprung accounts. *PQ*

Sound Quality: 80%

0 - - - - - - - - 100

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Barry Fox
Technology journalist
Barry Fox trained in electronics with the RAF and worked as a patent agent, but he gave that up to enter journalism. He is one of the world's top technology writers

Gone fibre

Upgrades to the UK's broadband infrastructure mean fast-fibre networking could be knocking on your door soon. But there's devil in the detail, explains **Barry Fox** – and do you really need it?

Everyone's doing it. Upgrading from 'copper' broadband to fibre. I did it and witnessed first-hand the other side of the pretty picture that telecoms providers paint. So, because most readers just want to listen to music in the best possible quality, and don't want to become IT experts, here's a quick jargon-busting survival guide.

In the beginning, broadband came into our homes via ordinary copper POTS (Plain Old Telephone Service) wires using clever technology called ADSL (Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line). Think of ADSL as the wired equivalent of DAB or digital TV; high frequencies are spread thin over a wide band. The closer you are to the local telephone exchange, ideally less than a mile, the better it all works because line resistance and noise is less. Shannon-Hartley theory rules.

ABOVE: A typical optical power meter (left) used to measure the – light – signal strength and (right) the guts of an old ONT ready to be glued onto a new wall mount in the author's home

UP AND DOWN

The A for Asymmetric here is important. DSL broadband works faster downstream into the home, than upstream out of the home. The telecoms companies now often send broadband from the exchange by optical fibre to cabinets in the street. These convert light to electrical pulses which travel a short distance into homes. This is Hybrid Fibre to Cabinet or Fibre to Street. It's faster, but still Asymmetrical in operation.

Now we are getting Full Fibre to The Home or Premises (FFTH or FFTP). There is talk of shutting down the copper network in a couple of years. Speech calls can still be made by fibre using VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) which lets an analogue phone connect to a digital line.

These are early days for Full Fibre. Everyone is learning on the fly and there are different technologies being used. As the contracts you will have to sign are likely to be for two years, it pays to know the difference between them. For example, Virgin (owned by Liberty Global and Telefonica) has traditionally connected homes by coaxial cable rather than POTS wires. Coax is faster than POTS. But Virgin is also going Full Fibre.

> 'Beware of paying for speeds you don't need'

OPEN SEASON

In 2006, BT was forced by Ofcom to set up an independent company (Openreach) to give rival companies access to its wire and fibre networks. Rivals install their own equipment inside BT's exchanges, but use BT's wires all the way through to subscribers' homes, competing with BT mainly on price and service.

But there's more. To increase competition, the government also encourages BT's rivals to spend a fortune on digging up streets to lay independent networks that run fibre from their own equipment all the way into our homes. And some other rivals use a scheme called Physical Infrastructure Access (PIA), which lets them run their own fibre through BT's underground ducts. They install their own equipment in BT's exchanges and our homes.

Making the final fibre connection in a home is a tricky precision job. The hair-thin glass has to be heat fused to a connector – like an S/PDIF plug – that mates with an ONT (Optical Network Terminal) wall box. This converts light to electricity and connects by conventional Ethernet cable to a Wi-Fi router.

Whereas S/PDIF runs at a few Mbp/s, broadband fibre is handling hundreds of Mbp/s. I've watched engineers discard pre-prepared connectors because they failed an optical test, and then have to use portable fusing equipment. The ONT now on my wall is actually two half boxes stuck together with sticky tape. The box the engineer was given to fit was a new model, incompatible with the existing infrastructure. Luckily, he had an old model kicking round in his van.

Beware of paying for speeds you don't need. Adverts boast that a 900Mbp/s or 1Gbp/s connection can run 100 devices at the same time. This is great if you live in a mansion with an army of kids and servants, all playing games and streaming 4K videos simultaneously. The ads don't remind you that incoming Gigabit speeds can easily be halved by the use of Wi-Fi.

And if 'going fibre' involves switching service provider, don't cancel your existing service until the new tech is up and running. Gotchas abound. For example, network devices such as music servers may not work with the new router until re-set. You won't know until the music mysteriously stops.

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Barry Willis
Journalist for top American audio-video publications
While his main interest is high-end audio, Barry Willis also writes about the culinary industry, visual art and theatre for a huge variety of US newspapers and magazines

Good rooms

Is it loudspeakers, amplification or sources that make a hi-fi system? **Barry Willis** argues that it begins with the listening space itself – and some will sound great by accident rather than design

A recent visit to a new audio acquaintance opened with his apology about his listening space, a big room with a high ceiling. 'The best-sounding rooms have lower ceilings', he said. I don't know how many he's been in, but in my experience high ceilings aren't problematic. Quite the opposite, in fact – some of the best rooms I've been in have high ceilings and unusual architectural features that give them unintentionally good acoustics.

Years ago, my friend Ken bought an old home on the east side of Atlanta. The place had a free-standing carriage house built of rough stacked stone. About the size of a modern two-car garage, but not quite rectangular, its walls were easily two-feet thick. We replaced the rotted roof with an open-beam gable design, complete with skylight, and installed a hardwood floor, windows and door, and a modern electrical system.

RIGHT: Meridian Audio's first digital active speaker was the D600, launched in 1989. Its current flagship model is the DSP8000 XE (right), which features six side-mounted 200mm woofers, a 160mm midrange and 25mm tweeter

SOUND FOUNDATIONS

Ken laid down a thick Chinese rug, on which stood a pair of Meridian digital active loudspeakers. To this day I have never heard a better room. The solid stone walls were astoundingly effective at keeping the bass inside where it belonged, and their rough texture was ideal for dispersing mid- and high-frequency reflections – a naturally occurring diffuser. Every music lover and audio expert who ventured into the 'yurt' agreed that, acoustically, it was among the best spaces they had ever encountered – an ideal recording venue.

> 'The room's solid stone walls kept the bass inside'

Also at this end of the spectrum is my friend Tina's beautiful old California hillside farmhouse. Its main room is a spacious affair with a high vaulted ceiling of tongue-and-groove hemlock and redwood beams and trusses, two bay windows, a brick fireplace, redwood flooring with plenty of rugs, a stairwell at one end, and lots of furnishings including books, artworks and a baby grand piano.

When I first met her, I was knocked out by how good the room sounded. A music lover but no audiophile, she had a 1980s-era single-brand department-store hi-fi set up in one of the alcoves. It sounded fantastic, not because her audio gear was anything special, but because the room's acoustics were as near perfect as I could imagine. The sound quality was accidental, of course – her ex-husband was a music-hating residential home builder but a hugely talented designer and carpenter. His fanatical attention to quality paid off not just visually but sonically too. Thanks to me, Tina has since made many upgrades to her system. Her room is still at the top of my list.

Good-sounding rooms are rare in North America, partly because of standard eight-foot ceilings, but also because of the nearly universal use of gypsum board ('sheetrock') over wood framing. Sheetrock is an acoustical nightmare. It's reflective in the mid and upper frequencies but flexes like a drum head with strong low frequencies. This is why apartment dwellers have disputes about music from their neighbours. The bass may not be all that apparent in your flat, but could be really annoying for someone four doors away.

One solution for this unwanted transmission is a building technique called 'shear wall construction', in which plywood is screwed to the framing, with sheetrock applied over it. A structural rigidity requirement in earthquake-prone California, the unintended benefit is that it keeps the music in the room rather than wafting down the street.

READ THE ROOM

In audio land, there are many conflicting theories about what's most important in making a system sound great. Some say it's the speakers, an obvious choice. Others say it's the source, or the amplification. Some even say it's the cabling or the building's electrical supply.

All of these concepts ignore the fundamental sonic contributions of the room itself. In my opinion, the room is supremely important. Start with a good one – or improve the one you have – and there's every chance that anything you play in it will sound tremendous.

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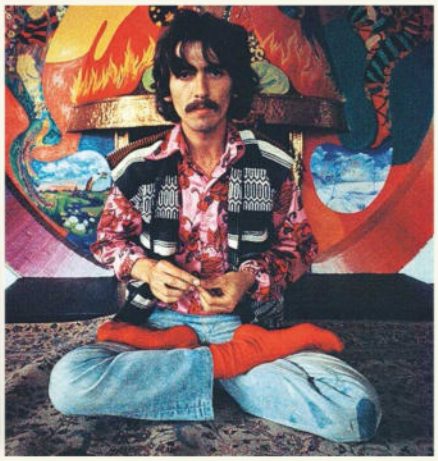
Jim Lesurf
Science Journalist
Jim Lesurf has spent a lifetime in audio, both as an engineer at UK hi-fi company Armstrong and reader in Physics and Electronics at St Andrew's University

Wonder stuff

George Harrison's soundtrack album to a psychedelic Brit flick released in 1968 might be the most oft-forgotten slice of Beatles-related music. **Jim Lesurf** has it on vinyl, but wants to know more

Despite being a fan of The Beatles, I must confess to having been underwhelmed by the recent release of a 'new' song – 'Now And Then' – that used what might be called a 'regenerated' version of John Lennon's vocals. However, it set me wondering... That song aside, what is the least well known or liked Beatles release?

This prompted me to hunt through my older LPs where I uncovered not one, but two copies of an album called *Wonderwall Music*, the soundtrack to the 1968 film *Wonderwall* and written by George Harrison. I suspect I'm not the only aging music lover who had forgotten all about it. Indeed, ever since it appeared I have the feeling it's became an 'orphan', an album The Beatles and EMI/Apple allowed to fade from memory.



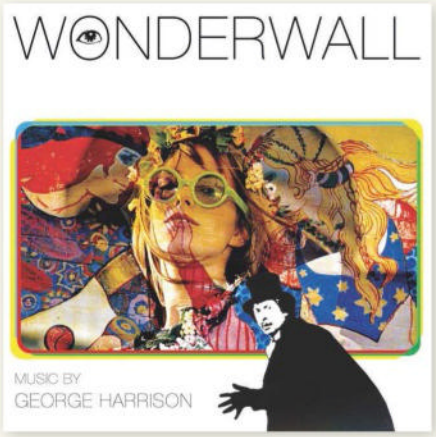
ABOVE: *Wonderwall Music* from 1968 (left) was George Harrison's debut solo album and the soundtrack to the film *Wonderwall* directed by Joe Massot, and (right) Harrison in 1966

FILLING IN THE BLANKS

The LP sleeve is bereft of cover notes beyond the basic title, *etc*. The labels on the LP itself list the tracks but not the timing of every track, and online research only threw up conflicting information as to the lengths of the songs on the record. I did my own DIY check on this and found that the track durations on my copies of the album didn't agree with the values given on the Internet, either!

Apparently more than one CD version was released, although I can't recall ever seeing these announced. Do the tracks on the CD also differ from those on the copies of the LP I own? (I have two because I used different record importers when seeking a copy. This was when it wasn't available from EMI in the UK. According to the Discogs website, my copies – numbered with 90490 on their sleeves – are the version sold in Italy in 1968.)

> 'The LP sleeve is bereft of notes beyond the basic title'



ABOVE: Poster for the movie *Wonderwall* starring Jack MacGowran and Jane Birkin

EAST MEETS WEST

As far as the music is concerned, having listened to the album again after many decades it seems a shame that it is often forgotten. *Wonderwall Music* is a fascinating mix of various types/styles, the most predictable for those who are familiar with George Harrison being what we in the UK tend to call 'Indian Classical Music'. I enjoy it, along with various other 'non-Western' traditions, but this might have put off many pop/rock enthusiasts in the era when the LP was released.

There are some tracks I'd skip, though, as they give the impression of being poorly recorded in ways that degrade the sound. Or maybe the master on which this Italian LP was based was cut poorly on the lathe.

The lack of any cover notes is also a curio for me. Perhaps it was a deliberate choice in a bid to get buyers to listen to Harrison's music with an open mind. Or, alternatively, because EMI regarded this album as a 'problem child' it wished to avoid drawing attention to, but felt compelled to issue.

Whatever the reason, it seems to be the most neglected or forgotten example of music by The Beatles. Possibly unjustly so. If there are any readers out there able to clear some of the fog away from this release, including more reliable information on the track lengths, it would be good to know. It might also spur a better-documented and produced version becoming available now.

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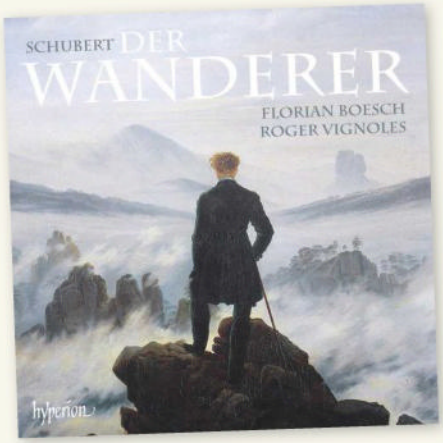
Peter Quantrill
Music Journalist
Peter Quantrill has been writing about music for magazines and record labels for 30 years. When not hunched over a CD player, he'll be at a concert, or the cricket

Let's hear it for Caspar

You probably have at least one painting by the landscape artist Caspar David Friedrich in your record collection, says **Peter Quantrill**, even if you have never paid it any attention...

Across Germany throughout 2024, exhibitions and events are celebrating the 250th anniversary of the painter Caspar David Friedrich, born in the north-German university town of Greifswald in September 1774. Okay, you may say, but this is a hi-fi magazine, so what? Well, we talk about Bernard Herrmann's music as the sound of Hitchcock, and Ligeti and Strauss as the sound of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In the same way, the paintings of Friedrich are the image of German Romanticism, the visual analogue to Schubert, Brahms and Reger.



ABOVE: Caspar David Friedrich's 'Wanderer Above The Sea Of Fog' from 1818 as used on the sleeve of Schubert's 'Der Wanderer' on Hyperion and the painter in a portrait from 1808

NATURE TRAIL

I am not a betting man, but I will wager that if you own more than 30 albums of music from that era, at least one of them will be illustrated by a Friedrich painting on the cover. Even more so if you favour music-led labels such as Hyperion and CPO rather than the artist-led Decca and DG. Time and again, like Bruckner experimenting and perfecting his ideas of symphonic form, Friedrich returns to man in nature, the central theme of Romanticism. Mountains and seas, rather than churches and palaces, are where his subjects begin to take the measure of their own stature.

No less than the lonely wanderer of Schubert's *Winterreise*, the characters of Wordsworth and Hardy lose and find themselves within the elements. None of this is news, but the themes of art in a given age are often overlooked in an age of specialism. The informed amateurs of a century ago would have been at ease discussing how a phrase in Mozart's *Figaro* describes the elegant gesture of a hand in a Gainsborough composition.

If you think of Brahms's 'Alto Rhapsody', that supremely gloomy, ultimately redemptive setting of Goethe in the Harz Mountains, can you do so without calling to mind Friedrich's 'Wanderer Above The Sea Of Fog'? This is surely the canvas that graced a thousand record sleeves. It does not take deep analysis or specialised appreciation to 'hear' the painting in musical terms, through the late sonatas of Schubert, the concertos of Schumann or the Lieder canon.

> 'The canvas that graced a thousand LP sleeves'

There is the wanderer, as the melody, defined on the rock of the key signature beneath him, apart from but wreathed in the texture of the piano or orchestra swirling around him. He looks out to some unknown point, offering himself to some numinous spirit which glorifies his independent mind and solitude. We are not so far away from the proud and fiery atheism of Nietzsche and then Richard Strauss, raised to heroic peaks in *Also Sprach Zarathustra* and *Elektra*.

'Painting in sound' was the task Beethoven first set himself in the *Pastoral* symphony. Throwing the theme forwards, it's always worth remembering that Mahler was specifically 'painting' *The Night Watch* of Rembrandt in the first *Nachtmusik* movement of his Seventh Symphony. Winding forwards again, the music of Morton Feldman and the paintings of Mark Rothko serve to illustrate and enrich each other.

WANDERING STARS

Friedrich himself was a man of letters and landscapes, showing no special interest in the composers of his day, unlike much more overtly 'musical' painters such as Klimt. The underground stream flowing between Friedrich and Brahms is the German nationalism which no longer holds any positive associations for their viewers and audiences today.

At a time when diversity and inclusion are the watchwords of artistic endeavour, any art celebrating individualism, let alone the inescapably gendered heroism of Man, strikes a dissonant chord. But Friedrich deserves better than the status of mere illustration to your album sleeves. His contemporary, the poet Hölderlin, spoke of 'a silencing of all individual being, in which it seems as if we had found all things'. The wanderers of Schubert and Friedrich alike surely have their gaze fixed on that end-point.

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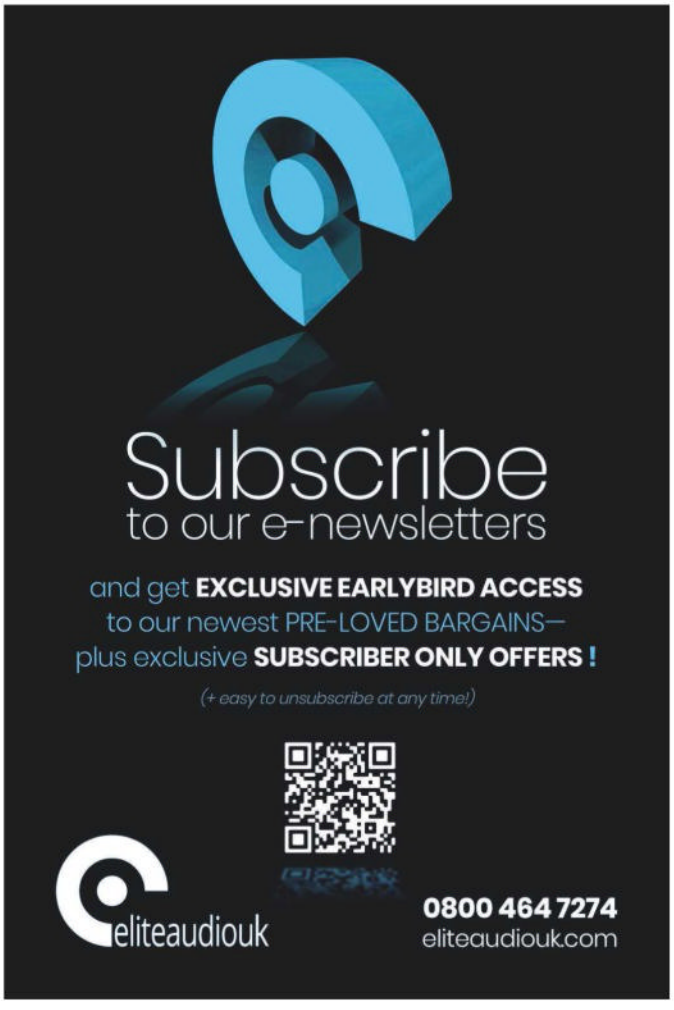

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Steve Harris
Contributor
Steve Harris edited *Hi-Fi News* between 1986 and 2005. He loves jazz, blues music, vinyl and vintage hi-fi and anything that makes good music come to life

Crossover queens

Is it really jazz? **Steve Harris** shines a spotlight on some of his favourite recent albums, including those from genre-hopping artists Veronica Swift, Ayanna Witter-Johnson and Stacey Kent

One of the most heartwarming albums of 2023 for me was *50 Years* [Ubuntu Music] by the Doncaster Jazz Alumni, a big-band in which former members celebrate Doncaster Youth Jazz Orchestra's golden anniversary. Under the guidance of its founder, John Ellis, the DYJO has played both the Montreux and Nice festivals and toured the US. It's equipped countless young players with the skills needed to work in music professionally.

JUDY MAXWELL

ABOVE: Ayanna Witter-Johnson on the cover of her crossover set, *Ocean Floor,* and (right) UK-based singer Stacey Kent at the mic while recording her album *Summer Me Winter Me*

BEYOND JAZZ

But another outstanding album of 2023 came from an American singer who'd acquired those skills as a child. Veronica Swift started early, because her father was the late jazz pianist Hod O'Brien, her mother the singer Stephanie Nakasian. She performed with her parents and made her first album, *Veronica's House Of Jazz*, at the age of nine.

There were two more albums on the HodStef label and one with saxophonist Jeff Rupert before she emerged as an addition to the Mack Avenue roster with *Confessions* in 2019 and *This Bitter Earth* in 2021. Then came her 2023 set, simply titled *Veronica Swift* and which reflected a new identity. As she explained in an interview for the radio station KALX 90.7FM, 'Rooted in jazz as I've been, there's a uniquely visceral power in rock and soul music that's always fuelled my creative passion'.

> 'It works because she really can sing anything'

Now she was exploding into other genres, especially rock, exemplified by a powerhouse cover of the song 'Closer' by industrial rock band Nine Inch Nails. Swift called this album 'transgenre', and the idea works because she really can sing anything, from Janis Joplin to opera. She can play instruments too. Doing 'Moanin'' on stage with Chris Botti, she grabs his trumpet and plays a chorus herself.

In this country, we have our own 'transgenre' star. Classically trained cellist, singer, dancer and composer Ayanna Witter-Johnson graduated in composition at the Trinity Laban Conservatoire and went on to a Master's at the Manhattan School of Music. On her *Ella, Reuben & Ay* EP, Ayanna and her cello (named Reuben) celebrated Ella Fitzgerald's 2017 centenary with rhythmically updated standards including 'Misty' and 'Cry Me A River'. Her following full-length album *Road Runner*, is categorised by Discogs as 'Hip Hop, Jazz, Funk/Soul'. In the extraordinary video for 'Nothing Less', she dances with the cello.

As a guest on the BBC Radio 4 programme *Woman's Hour* in 2019, she told presenter Jenni Murray: 'I studied classically but as I started to develop my sound as a songwriter, I really wanted to hear other things, and that's when I started to really play it more percussively, like a guitar, like a bass, like a drum'.

And Witter-Johnson has made her mark as a composer. On her 2023 album *Ocean Floor*, she's joined by the percussion section of the London Symphony Orchestra and pianist Gwillym Simcock. Her 'Ocean Suite' references the terrible story of the 18th century slave ship Zong, whose crew threw 130 enslaved people overboard, but ends with a message of joy and hope.

BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

By contrast, perhaps, with Witter-Johnson or Swift, US-born but UK-based Stacey Kent can still be celebrated as a jazz singer, though an interpreter rather than an improviser, singing in English, French and Portuguese, with a repertoire of standards, chanson and Brazilian songs.

Her 2023 album *Summer Me, Winter Me* released on Naïve Records [BLV 8224], responds to a question often asked at concerts, 'Which album is that song on?' – to which the answer is sometimes that it's not on any album. Kent has sung Jacques Brel's 'Ne me quitte pas' in English and French but, she says, 'Whatever the language, someone would ask why I hadn't sung it in the other.'

So she included complete versions in both. For her countless fans, it'll be heartwarming either way.

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Sound Off!

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PLATTER MATTERS

COPPER MATS AND THE SOUND OF VINYL

Those interested in vinyl are aware of the choice between belt- and direct-drive. Some in the direct-drive camp will say belt-drive turntables are flawed because the disconnect between the drive and the platter means dynamics suffer. The belt-drive brigade counter that direct-drive can make vinyl sound like CD and a bit mechanical.

Ken Kessler's response to the letter from Mr Reid on this subject [*HFN* Feb '24] mentioned the Trio L-07D turntable. I have been considering buying one, but have heard that it can sound a bit flat and two-dimensional. Then I read that this could be much improved by adding a copper mat on top of the platter. This reduces unwanted interactions between the pick-up and electronics under the platter.

For example, the Thorens TD 124 DD Anniversary has a platter topped by a layer of copper. I can't help thinking fewer electronics near the cartridge is a good thing.

Steve Blake, via email

ABOVE: The TD 124 DD Anniversary has a platter topped by 5mm of copper

Ken Kessler replies: Direct-drive vs belt (vs idler)? All matters of taste and politics – listen to a Thorens TD 124 DD and tell me it's not magnificent, while I can think of plenty of dire belt-drive decks.

As for the Trio L-07D, it's one of the very few items I parted with in the past that I wish I still owned. I never had any trouble with isolating the electronics (except with a hum-prone Decca cartridge) but I would imagine a copper mat would be the solution. If you have the chance of buying an L-07D, grab it!

PHOTO: WWW.TANNOYISTA.COM

ABOVE: A Trio L-07D turntable equipped with a Denon DL-103C1 pick-up mounted using a Funk Firm Houdini cartridge decoupler together with a Cobra headshell

Perfect piano

VISIT TO VENICE HAS READER PONDERING LIVE HIGHS

Barry Willis's Opinion column in the April issue in which he described the sound of live music when attending a theatre performance of *My Name Is Asher Lev*, really struck a chord with me. I had a similar, although not so grand, experience back in 2023. My wife and I celebrated our 50 years together by flying to Venice before returning on the Orient Express. Our hotel was situated next to a building with a roof garden on which a wedding reception was being prepared.

Our room was adjacent, and the sounds coming from the musicians warming up was just lovely. The piano sounded alive as opposed to just live and the notes coming from it were magical. Maybe we will never replicate 'live' with our audio systems and it's best to treat live and recorded music as simply different experiences.

Stephen Sexton, via email

Barry Willis replies: 'Live vs. recorded' has been both a controversy and a marketing ploy since the days of the first primitive recordings. I learned long ago to regard the two as different, and to re-calibrate my ear as often as possible with live acoustic music. It's discouraging how many audiophiles and audio professionals don't take more opportunities to do likewise.

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OUR HI-FI WORLD THROUGH THE EYES OF WHITWORTH

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Quad speaker stand saga

WHEN ACCESSORIES GO ASTRAY AND REVIEW STANDS STRAY FROM SPEC...

I agree with Ken Kessler that the Quad Revela 1 loudspeaker [*HFN* Mar '24] is great value for money and that the finish is superb, having bought a pair. Mine replaced some Quad Z1 loudspeakers, which are also very fine and are now used in a second system. The Revela 1s are driven by my Quad VA-One valve amp [*HFN* Dec '16] and there is a tad more level compared to the Z1s, which is useful. I think that's down to the difference in sensitivity.

However, those who buy the Revela 1s may be disappointed to discover that there is no certificate of performance or rubber feet as stated in the manual. I queried this with my dealer, who checked with Quad, and it seems to be a misprint! Maybe the Revela 2 floorstanders have them. I have since been told Quad is checking with China, where the Revela 1s are made.

Ronald Koorm, via email

ABOVE: The Quad Revela 1 speaker on its dedicated stand, a pair of which costs £700

I am a happy subscriber to your great magazine and would like to praise the quality of the reviews in general. But I found Ken Kessler's assessment of the Quad Revela 1 loudspeakers frustrating for two reasons. The first was that the dedicated stands were not supplied for the test. The second was that stands from a different brand were used instead, which were 7cm taller than the ones recommended!

I believe that the Revela 1 was designed to work its best on 60cm stands, let alone open-framed types. Changing the stands' characteristics will surely influence the speaker's performance. As a user of bookshelf speakers – Totem Model 1, KEF LS50 [*HFN* Jul '12] and Quad L11 – I am well aware of not only the importance of proper height and alignment between the speakers and ear, but also that different driver-to-floor distances affect the sound.

My stands are Target R4s and Partington Super Dreadnoughts. So why was the proper height neglected? And why don't you only review bookshelf speakers with their dedicated stands, provided they exist? This may seem pedantic, but I am always very interested in the set-up used when a product is reviewed, especially in the case of speakers.

Vasco Amado, via email

Ken Kessler replies: I can't comment on missing feet, but please note that I only review with Blu Tack securing loudspeakers to stands. Due to space constraints, I didn't write that my final listening to the Revela 1 followed trials with three stands to find the best sound. With respect to Quad's own stand, I doubt it is better than the Music Tools, IF or Foundation supports.

Crucially, regarding height, that relates *solely* to tweeter height relative to the ear, not solely the manufacturer's recommendation. In my case, with the Quad Revela 1s forming an equilateral triangle of 2.5m per side, and my seat's height being 54cm, the 67cm-tall Music Tools One proved optimal.

JITTERBUG
USB Filter

Can a £39 insect make all your CD files sound better than Hi-Res?

Yes and no: Using the same equipment and a quality DAC, a 24/96 file (for example) will always sound better than a CD 16/44.1 file … but, even a single JitterBug will often allow a CD file to be more musical and more emotionally stimulating than a Hi-Res file without the benefit of a JitterBug.

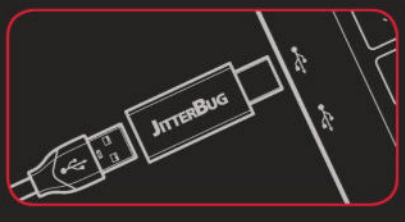
Noise is the problem. Real noise—the kind you can't hear directly. Most often, the word "noise" is used to describe tape hiss or a scratch on a record, but these sounds aren't noise; they are properly reproduced sounds that we wish weren't there.

Problem noise is essentially random, resonant or parasitic energy, which has no meaning. It can't be turned into discrete sounds, but it does compromise signal integrity and the performance of everything it touches.

JitterBug's dual-function line-conditioning circuitry greatly reduces the noise and ringing that plague *both* the data and power lines of USB ports, whether on a computer, streamer, home stereo or car audio front-panel USB input.

A single JitterBug is used in between devices (i.e., in series) as shown below. For an **additional "wow" experience,** try a second JitterBug into another USB port on the same device (such as a computer). Whether the second port is vacant, or is feeding a printer or charging a phone, JitterBug's noise-reduction ability is likely to surprise you. No, the printer won't be affected—only the audio!

While a JitterBug helps MP3s sound a lot more like music, high-sample-rate files have the most noise vulnerability. Try a JitterBug or two on all your equipment, but never more than two per USB bus. There is such a thing as too much of a good thing.



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My pre-loved audio agony!

IT'S A BITTERSWEET BLAST FROM THE PAST AS READER REVEALS HIS RETRO REGRETS

I'm always delighted when I receive the alert that my digital copy of *HFN* is available to read, and I really enjoyed the April edition! Barry Fox's Opinion column on cherished old equipment was particularly apt. I recently dug out my Marantz 74MR2021 'Layla' CD receiver, which still looks lovely, but it now jumps and skips. Similarly, I thought my old Optimus Pro LX5 speakers would be great for use in a surround sound system I was setting up, but the drivers have perished.

Finally, and most traumatically, I have discovered that my Revox B77 MkII reel-to-reel recorder is in need of a complete overhaul after a decade of storage. And both engineers I've tasked with this in the past now appear to be no longer contactable.

I will follow Barry's advice and check for YouTube tutorials on how to fix the Marantz CD receiver. However, his Opinion column, and the fact that I have encountered many of the issues he talked about myself, has led me to think back on some of the great kit I've owned over the years.

For example, I now regret having sold my Ariston RD-80 turntable, Vincent SP-T100 mono power amps, Musical Fidelity KW250S all-in-one, and Quad II valve amps. The last in my list needed repairs I could not afford. Now a pensioner, I cannot justify spending money on changing my system every few years, but every issue of *HFN* has me dreaming that when that lottery boat comes in I shall buy... well, it's a fantasy which shifts and changes every month!

ABOVE: In need of an overhaul – reader Stephen's Revox B77 MkII reel-to-reel deck

In the meantime my Marantz SACD player, Arcam amp and active MartinLogan Purity loudspeakers continue to provide a lot of pleasure. And I've just bought a couple of iFi Zen components in an attempt to stream Tidal. Keep up the good work.

Stephen Bell, via email

Barry Fox replies: Your tale reminds me of when a BBC engineer told me why the UK re-started TV broadcasting after WW2 with the same old 405-line system, rather than use higher-resolution systems, *eg*, 819 lines in France and 525 in the USA. It was to avoid the need for all broadcasters and viewers to buy all-new equipment. However, most of the pre-war hardware no longer worked, because its capacitors were leaking. So almost everyone had to buy new kit anyway and the UK was stuck with low-res 405 TV until 625 line launched in the 1960s.

ABOVE: Seller's remorse – Stephen's Musical Fidelity KW250S before he moved it on

Four years ago, AudioQuest shook the hi-fi world with our first DragonFly DAC–Preamp–Headphone Amp—the rare audio product that brought more compelling sound to *all* music lovers, playing high-res files to MP3s on perfectionist systems and modest laptops.

Now, the new DragonFly Black and DragonFly Red exceed their predecessor in every way, delivering more beautiful music, boasting software upgradability, and providing compatibility with **Android** and **Apple iOS** mobile devices.

While **Black** offers more clarity, depth and category-defining value than ever before, the take-no-prisoners **Red** provides even more finesse, resolution, torque and more than enough power to drive even the most demanding headphones.

The word is out: DigitalAudioReview.net's John Darko calls DragonFly Red and Black "the finest examples of everyman hifi to ever grace these pages. Their value quotients explode the dial."

Let the joyful experience begin!

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Your subwoofer solutions shared

SWEET SPOTS, SETTINGS AND RIDDING ROOMS OF BOOM AS READERS SEEK TO AUGMENT THEIR SPEAKERS' LOW END

I read Ken Kessler's Off The Leash column and his reply to the letter from Bill McCardle in the March 2024 issue, both of which concerned subwoofers. I have a listening room that measures 3.5m square, which is the worst of all worlds, and settled on a pair of ProAc Tablette 10 Signature loudspeakers as they keep boominess at bay.

I wanted to know if I could introduce some bass extension but tailor this to my own requirements, so I bought the most affordable decent subwoofer I could find – a Wharfedale SW150. I discovered that I could avoid a confused sound in the lower midrange by setting the cut-off to the quoted lowest frequency the Tablette 10 Signatures were able to output. To find the subwoofer volume, I played a track whose bass used to excite the room with my previous speakers then turned down the SW150 until this was acceptable – about 10% of its volume.

I now have a sound that exploits all the benefits of the ProAc speakers but which adds a touch of bass kick and ambience. This gives a sound that in my opinion better represents recordings. Importantly, with a modest outlay, I have found that subwoofers can work with my set-up, and now know that I can purchase an even more accomplished subwoofer with confidence.

Richard Fletcher, via email

In the March '24 issue, Ken Kessler was wondering which subwoofer to use with his LS3/5A and Quad ESL 57 speakers. Well, has he heard a RiPol subwoofer,

ABOVE: ModalAkustik's MusikBass sub uses the RiPol principle devised by Axel Ridtahler

ABOVE: B&W's ASW608 sub (left) sees an 8in driver driven by an amp rated at 200W while the Wharfedale SW150 packs a 150W amp and 10in driver and is part of the budget Diamond range

devised by the German loudspeaker designer Axel Ridtahler? Two years ago I heard a ModalAkustik speaker system at a hi-fi show in Hamburg and loved the sound, though it was way beyond my financial means. It used the company's MusikBass RiPol subwoofer, which is designed to be used with electrostatic speakers as well as traditional designs.

Olaf, via email

Bill McCardle's letter in the March '24 issue on subwoofers and Ken Kessler's response was very timely as I recently decided to augment my B&W 805 loudspeakers by splashing out on a pair of the company's ASW608 subwoofers. I do have 'form' in this area as for many years I had Quad ESL 57s with Gradient subwoofers. I finally parted with them as they were difficult to accommodate in my room and somewhat limited in their volume capability, but I still recall them fondly. Their controls were readily accessible, so it was very easy to adjust the level of these subwoofers.

I was amazed on reading the manual that accompanies the ASW608 that there are so many ways to configure it – single or two units with input from signal feeds or from speakers. The latter option had never occurred to me, and I've fed mine from signal leads. The initial urge is to set the subwoofer level to 'obvious', but this soon wears thin and it takes a good deal of experimentation to set the level appropriately. One way is to select a recording of a male voice and then adjust the subwoofer level until the vocal has some resonance, but is not 'boomy'.

My musical taste is mainly classical but I also enjoy pop. This tends to have bass content and the presence of the subs is immediately evident and pleasurable. Orchestral music benefits by having cellos, basses and other lower-register instruments brought into balance with the rest of the orchestra. It's subtle, but much closer to the concert hall experience. Chamber music is also more balanced-sounding while solo piano is a revelation.

I'm 'sold' on the contribution of subwoofers, but they do require careful consideration as to their positioning while setting the balance appropriately is a skill. My subwoofers seem quite sensitive and I'm only using a fraction of the volume setting, so a fine touch is needed. Also, having left and right subs means 'two' fine touches are required. A remote control would be helpful!

Nick Willans, via email

Ken Kessler replies: Seasoned readers know I'm 1) space-constrained, 2) a pensioner, 3) after a simpler life, and 4) emphatically *not* a bass addict. Thus musings about subwoofers were strictly 'What if?' as I am utterly content with what I hear from my LS3/5As and cherished Quad 57s. I kinda wished I hadn't opened the subwoofer can of worms because, as Messrs Fletcher, Olaf and Willans concur, subwoofer matching is firstly about experimentation with settings and secondly, room- and listener-dependent. Positioning is also super-critical, so subwoofers just may be the most difficult component to accommodate.

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‘Man cave’ Denon classic

MIDI-SIZED SUPER LINEAR CONVERTER PLAYER STILL MAKING MUSIC DECADES ON

As someone who enjoys tinkering with vintage audio components, I always find Tim Jarman’s Vintage Reviews fascinating. But I was particularly interested in his appraisal of the Denon DCD-600 CD player [*HFN* Feb ’24]. In 1986, the year before the launch of the DCD-600, I purchased a Denon DCD-1000 midi-sized CD player, which also sported a ‘Super Linear Converter’ logo.

Although using a different PCM53 DAC and lacking the trim capability, it does have the double sample-and-hold circuits to align the phase of the left and right channels. There is no remote and just a small four-digit display, showing either track/index, track time or programmed tracks, but otherwise it has similar control functions to the DCD-600, including the separate select and skip buttons. It is also similarly quick to load.

A significant difference is that the DCD-1000 has a headphone volume control, so it is indeed surprising that the machine Tim reviewed lacked one. My player still operates flawlessly and the only maintenance ever needed was to apply cleaner to the noisy volume control.

My DCD-1000 remains in use in my ‘man cave’, along with three QED components from the same 1986 system: an A240CD/SA amp, T237 FM tuner and R232E turntable. Occasional faults have arisen over the years with these, but all have been easily repaired. The original KEF C60 speakers I used with this system were long ago passed on to my son and replaced by a pair of even older B&W DM4s, which I have owned since 1974. While we have a newer and ‘better’ system in our living room, these vintage items are still capable of producing a most enjoyable sound, at least to my ageing ears, which is the main point after all.

Alan Dudley, Dorset

ABOVE: The Denon DCD-1000 player from 1986 used a single Burr-Brown PCM53 DAC

Tim Jarman replies: Denon's ‘Super Linear Converter’ is one of the schemes that showed the Japanese were well aware of the limitations of using a single time-shared DAC. Even when two DAC chips were employed they were sometimes still operated in the same way, the Yamaha CD-1 [*HFN* May ’16] being one example of this approach.

Many ideas were tried in order to solve the problems associated with single DACs, from the analogue phase shift network found in early Technics machines like the SL-P3 [*HFN* Sep ’22] to modest oversampling systems, such as the twofold arrangement employed in the Aiwa DX-1500 player.

All this was very clever, of course, but the superior performance of the Philips/Marantz concept of having two DAC chips fed with simultaneously available left and right channel data was clearly the way to do it. This rapidly became the norm in quality Japanese players from 1988 onwards.

ABOVE: Another ‘Super Linear Converter’ player, the Denon DCD-600 arrived a year after the midi-sized DCD-1000 and also used a single Burr-Brown DAC, in this case the PCM56P

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Philips AH585 loudspeaker

Smallest of a four-strong range of innovative MFB (Motional Feedback) loudspeakers, Philips' AH585 was in production from 1972-82. How does it fare today?
Review: **Tim Jarman** Lab: **Paul Miller**

The Philips Motional Feedback (MFB) loudspeaker has been mentioned a number of times in these pages over recent years. The company achieved considerable success with both its first- and second-generation models, including the 22RH544 [*HFN* Nov '16], but in the UK at least, the third generation is less commonly encountered. The AH585 seen here is the smallest of three consumer speakers, the others being the similar but larger AH586 and the three-way AH587.

These new designs saw Philips work hard to apply its MFB techniques to a series of more conventional-looking speakers. They were also easier to hook up to non-Philips equipment as they used standard RCA connections operating at signal levels and impedances that suited all preamps, rather than just the few made by Philips itself.

PETAL TO THE METAL

The two larger models appeared in 1978 but the AH585 did not arrive until the following year. Previous Philips MFB loudspeakers had been marketed as part of the company's 'High Fidelity International' line but this was beginning to look a little old fashioned as the 1980s approached. To freshen up the offer, the new MFB designs were launched as part of the Black Tulip series and were finished in simulated black ash sporting a bright metal trim to give them a modern, 'high-tech' look.

The AH585 was a small two-way model featuring a 180mm MFB woofer and a 25mm soft dome tweeter of a type popular across the industry at the time. Unlike the previous small MFB model (the RH541) it employed two power amplifiers in each enclosure and electronic crossover circuits. The construction of the cabinet was in line with established practices for quality loudspeakers of the period. The outer shell was constructed from 12mm-thick chipboard with the baffle being made as a heavy resin moulding with a deep internal lattice structure to enhance stiffness.

In the original MFB models the electronics had been placed in a sealed-off chamber in the rear of the cabinet, but in the third-generation designs the partition had been removed and replaced with a thick foam rubber block [see pic, p123]. The rear panel of the amplifier thus formed the back of the loudspeaker pressure chamber and had to be sealed accordingly.

'The AH585 employs two amps in each enclosure'

A truly active loudspeaker offers the designer much greater freedom when it comes to the specification of the crossover characteristics. There is no need to worry about efficiency or losses in the components as this is easily corrected with further amplification. Also, filters with much steeper cut-offs and far greater rejection outside the desired band of frequencies can be realised. Phase linear techniques are also easier to employ in active crossovers than in passive ones.

The design of the crossover circuit in each AH585 unit has a number of features not found in conventional loudspeakers. The first is the use of a global 'rumble' type filter that has its corner frequency set at 40Hz and employs a sharp 12dB/octave slope. This effectively defines the lowest frequency the loudspeaker will play down to and prevents the MFB system from having to work too hard. It should not be considered as a serious limitation; conventional loudspeakers of this size begin to show significantly reduced sensitivity at a significantly higher frequency, typically around 100Hz. After this the signal path splits two ways, one going to the woofer and the other to the tweeter.

Meanwhile, the tweeter circuit contains a simple electronic filter that removes all

RIGHT: The 25mm dome tweeter is slightly offset from the 180mm bass/mid unit, allowing room for standby/active lights (the AH585 is auto-sensing), and a graphic illustrating an idealised frequency response

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RIGHT: The heart of the MFB concept was a small piezo-electric element placed behind the bass driver's large dust cap in the throat of the cone. Its measure of cone movement was used to generate a corrective signal that 'linearised' the driver's performance

but the treble frequencies, the intriguing part being that this tweeter signal is also electronically subtracted from the signal going into the filter for the woofer. This process performs much of the necessary bass filtering work and ensures that the phase relationship between the two signals is maintained. Nothing like this is possible in a standard passive crossover. After this, MFB correction is applied to the bass signal and in this form it passes to the power amps. This ensures the woofer cone follows the incoming programme signal accurately.

THE ODD COUPLE

These third-generation Philips MFB speakers were the first complete range to employ DC-coupling between the power amps and the speaker drivers. The advantages this gives are less critical in an MFB system where the amplifier's output impedance is already close to zero (if not slightly negative) over the operating bandpass. It is, however, a further improvement that means the corrective mechanisms are required to work with less effort.

In the AH585 the bass amplifier is rated at 30W and the treble one at 5W [see PM's Lab Report, p125]. The output level of both amps is monitored and the input signal automatically limited if too much drive is applied. This makes the system as a whole practically impossible to overload. Conventional protection is included to switch the units off should a large DC voltage become present at the output of either power amp, perhaps as the result of the failure of one of the output transistors.

In the original MFB models each enclosure defaulted to standby in the absence of an input signal. Once programme material of a sufficient level was applied, the speaker came to life – often with some initial distortion as the amplifiers and MFB loop stabilised. Although the AH585 worked in superficially the same way, the internal arrangements were different. All the amplifiers remained powered all the time and when activated the drive units were connected to them via a relay. This could be seen as wasteful in some ways but it did mean that full performance was available immediately.

The AH585 is certainly easier to use than the older models (RH532, *etc*). In order to keep the cable lengths (and therefore their capacitance) the same, both units should still be daisy-chained together – there is a switch on each to select which plays the left channel and which plays the right [see pic, p125].

LEFT: AH585 [front] was the smallest of a range that included the 586, the 587 and the 545 'Studio Monitor', seen here with grilles in place

LIGHT FIXTURES

Meanwhile, to the rear of the speaker is a knob that sets the input sensitivity and impedance, lower sensitivities being accompanied with a fixed load of 1kohm to suit the speaker outputs of integrated amps. For sensitivities less than about 3V the loading is 100kohm, which any modern preamp should be able to work with.

The version of the familiar Philips soft-dome tweeter used is mounted on an integral alloy flange with moulded-in concentric rings to break up surface

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RIGHT: The PSU, active crossover, LF amp (inc. MFB), and HF amp are all mounted behind the speaker's gasket-sealed rear panel. A strip of foam separates the electronics from the rear of the two baffle-mounted drivers

waves. The woofer has a matching alloy trim ring, but this is not part of the drive unit itself. Two LED indicators show the power status, the green one being lit whenever power is present and the red one while the loudspeaker is in operation. Each enclosure comes with a 7m-long captured mains cable.

TIM LISTENS

If the intention here was to produce a speaker that combined the advantages of the MFB process with a more 'normal' sound then it can be considered a success. The older RH532 sounds startlingly different to everything else (with the possible exception of real live music) but while the AH585 is less of a shock, it sounds more familiar. This is not to downplay its qualities – another key virtue is stereo depth and imaging, both of which rapidly coalesce without the need for intense concentration by the listener.

Clever though MFB is, it is not magic, and one must remember that these are small loudspeakers in small sealed cabinets – they need to be located reasonably close to the wall behind them to help get the bass out into the room. Care here is vital as it's easy to smother the tight, tuneful 'MFB sound' in thick, reinforcement-originated boom. The other end of the scale is far simpler as Philips' tweeter simply shines in this application. It is easy to forget how normal crossovers and cables can blunt the performance of a tweeter, but having no coupling components and only about 30cm of wiring between the AH585's driver and its dedicated amplifier makes the treble extremely vivid and super-fast. Stands that see the tweeters positioned at near ear-level height are ideal.

An appropriate musical challenge for the AH585s was Kraftwerk's 'Trans-Europe Express' [Capitol CDP 7 46473 2], a piece which normally only makes any sense at all when played pretty loudly through large loudspeakers. Of course, it was the MFB-reinforced bassline I was listening for, but what actually grabbed my attention was the sharpness of the electronic percussion, even at low listening. The bass had its chance in the following track, 'Metal On Metal', and yes, it was still deep, rich and well defined. I felt that the 30+5W rating was well chosen in this design, although it was odd that the treble seemed to run out of headroom before the bass (albeit at a point where the sound as a whole was deafeningly loud). Typically, it's the other way around.

> 'The treble is extremely vivid and super-fast'

Acoustic material showed the AH585's tonal balance to be essentially neutral but overlaid with the distinctive MFB signature of bass that is both a little 'tubby' but very well defined. Each note was rendered as subtly different rather than gathered around a fixed port resonance. 'On Every Street' by Dire Straits [Vertigo 510160-2] sounded slightly warm, but it was elevated by that odd MFB trick of making it sound as if one is listening at the desk in the recording studio rather than to a finished recording at home.

NO RETURN

The final proof of the 'rightness' of this design is that it is difficult to go back to listening to conventional loudspeakers. At any price, I always felt I was missing something. Unlike the early Philips MFB designs, these late models are less a means of demonstrating the possibilities of advanced technology and more a practical

RIGHT: Service manual for the 'Hi-Fi MFB Box 6585' describes the specifications for the integral 30W LF and 5W HF amplifiers, and the AD 70651/MFB4 mid/woofer and AD 01635/T15 dome tweeter

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ABOVE: The cabinet rear includes RCA in/outs designated by a switch as either 'left' or 'right' channel. The speaker's 0-25V input sensitivity range is governed by a rotary while the high- and low-pass crossover arms, and MFB level, are all adjusted via a trio of small trimpots

packaging of the techniques to create a more 'normal' loudspeaker of exceptional quality. It works.

BUYING SECONDHAND

While plentiful on the Continent, all third-generation Philips MFB speakers are hard to find in the UK. Reliability is good, but this period of Philips production is well known for problems with soldering, so any fault investigation should start with a search for poor joints. The speaker relay is another common trouble spot – it is not easy to access but once removed it can be dismantled for cleaning. The quality of all the passive components is top rate so there is no need to replace any of these simply for the sake of it.

One thing that does seem to deteriorate is the MFB sensor itself. Reduced output means the system becomes less effective, resulting in bloated bass and little in the way of MFB action. There is a preset control at the rear of the unit which will compensate for this, the correction normally being well within the adjustment range. Even though the amplifiers are DC-coupled there is no need to zero the midpoint voltage as this is done automatically. The bias does need to be set though, and it is worth checking, as many of these units will have received no attention since they were made.

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

While not as quirky as the original incarnations of Philips' MFB, the AH585 is still a special loudspeaker that is well worth hearing if you get the chance. MFB is only part of the story, of course, because the well resolved electronics, well-made cabinets and high-quality drive units all contribute to a fine level of performance. Easy system matching makes trying a pair relatively straightforward.

Sound Quality: 85%

0 - - - - - - - - 100

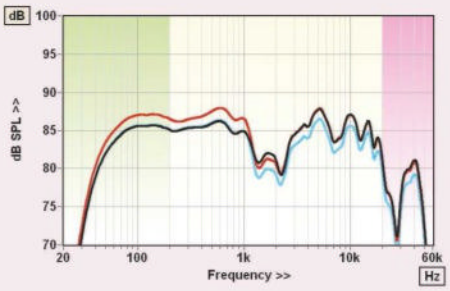
LAB REPORT

PHILIPS AH585 *(Vintage)*

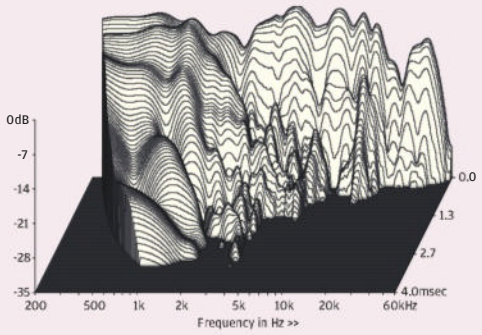
In addition to its corrective 'motional feedback' technology, the AH585 is, first and foremost, an early example of a fully active loudspeaker with a line-level input, two-way electronic crossover and separate power amplifiers for its bass and treble drivers. The motional feedback (~10dB) is applied within the LF amplifier to linearise the behaviour of the 180mm pulp-fibre coned bass/mid driver although it cannot accommodate structural modes in the cone substrate or cabinet – note resonance at ~600Hz in both the response [Graph 1] and CSD waterfall [Graph 2].

The input sensitivity of the AH585 is adjustable to match the output of any likely partnering preamplifier/amplifier via a variable attenuator at the rear [see opposite] operating over a notional 0-25V input range. In practice, with the AH585 set to a 1.2V input sensitivity, a 200mV line input raised a 1m axial response to the 85dB/1kHz level illustrated here [see Graph 1, below]. This response, optimised as far as possible, still shows errors of ±4.3dB largely due to a broad depression through the midband that announces a far brighter treble above 4kHz. There are what look like cancellation ripples in the dome's HF response, the latter extending to 20kHz (–6dB re. 10kHz).

Very small adjustments of the LF and HF trimpots will effect relatively large swings in output, these acting below and above the 1.5kHz crossover, respectively. Positive and negative adjustments of just 10° on the trimpots are illustrated by the red (boost to LF) and blue (attenuation of HF) traces [Graph 1], these amounting to ±2dB. The MFB trimpot has no impact on harmonic distortion – this exceeding 1% above 86dB/1m output – but it does influence the AH585's LF tuning. The idealised 43Hz-1.3kHz (–6dB) bandwidth of the bass/mid driver is achieved with the pot set at the ~11.30 position, this yielding a diffraction-corrected bass extension of 40Hz [–6dB re. 200Hz; green shaded area on Graph 1]. This is very impressive for a driver this size in a sealed cabinet of limited (9 litre) internal volume [see pic, p123]. **PM**



ABOVE: Response inc. nearfield bass driver [green], freefield corrected to 1m at 2.83V [yellow], ultrasonic [pink]. Slight +ve adj. to LF (red); –ve adj. to HF (blue)



ABOVE: A strong resonance at ~600Hz also punches through the response [above]. Cone modes are >3kHz

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Response error (200Hz–20kHz)	±4.3dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	40Hz / 20.2kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	1.9% / 0.15% / 0.5%
Dimensions (HWD) / **Weight** (each)	348x229x197mm / 8.1kg

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Major to Minor

Apogee follows the Stage with the hybrid Centaurus Major and Minor but has it made its ribbon technology more accessible, wonders **Ken Kessler**

Hi-Fi News Jul 1991

Each month *HFN* will bring you an article from our vast archive of features and reviews from yesteryear

Feeling a bit like the boy who cried 'Wolf!', I still can't help but regard this new range of speakers from Apogee as 'ribbons for the masses'. But unlike the last models that inspired this sort of reaction – the Stages [p129] and Calipers – the new Centaurs really do make Apogees accessible to a wide range of consumers. And not only by virtue of their cost.

The name, credited to Brian Rivas of Pinewood Audio, is the neatest yet to denote 'hybrid'. And as the Centaurs *are* hybrids, with traditional Apogee ribbons mated to dynamic woofers, the company has chosen to regard them as a truly separate model range.

SPACE INVADERS

The Centaurs will invite into the fold a number of hi-fi enthusiasts who were tempted by the full-range models but wouldn't give up their existing amplifiers or make room for speakers craving whole square metres of *lebensraum*. The Centaurs, unlike their all-ribbon siblings, rewrite the rules of Apogee ownership in the following ways:

(1) High sensitivity and a 6ohm impedance make them suitable for 'real world' amps. I've heard them work beautifully with a 50W/ch NAD.

(2) The Centaurs give up little 'air' even when placed within 12in of the back wall. Hell, they sound pretty swell when shoved right up against the wall, because the depth of woofer enclosure keeps the ribbon at least 8in away from it.

(3) They work happily with valve amplifiers, including tiny ones.

(4) They offer the decades-old familiarity of cone-sourced bass.

ABOVE: The Apogee Centaurus Minor (left) and Centaurus Major (right) cost £1149 and £4200 respectively on launch

The range consists of three models, this review dealing with the £1149 Centaurus Minor at the bottom of the range, and the £4200 Centaurus Major at the top. In between sits the £1645 Centaur.

SQUARE NUMBERS

From the front, these speakers look like traditional Apogees that have been squared off, and have their bass ribbons covered by black grilles instead of the familiar see-through mesh. But now the grilles cover large

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baffles containing dynamic woofers rather than planar-shaped bass drivers. At the back, meanwhile, you see the enclosures dedicated to the woofers, which conveniently provide each Centaur with cross-sections that preclude the need for the 'legs' which support the 'all-panel' models. Apogee provides screw-in spikes, which allow you to dial in some tilt, as important here as it is with the Stages if you wish to recreate 3D sound with any accuracy.

CONTOUR OPTIONS

The 26in dipole ribbon in the Minor works from 800Hz up, with a 6.5in woofer crossing over at that point in 12dB/octave steps. When it comes to the Major the crossover point for the 40in dipole ribbon is 450Hz, with the bottom octaves handled by a 10in woofer. The ribbons are the familiar Kapton-backed Apogee types, using high-energy strontium ferrite ceramic magnets.

The Major can be bi-wired or bi-amped, while the Minor cannot. Given that the Major revealed the worth of bi-wiring in a most emphatic manner, I can only dream of what this enhancement would do for the Minor. But I was informed by Apogee that dealers in the home market were emphatic about simplified connections for the Minor, while Stateside pricing is so critical at this point that the extra few bucks it would cost for splitting the crossover and fitting more five-way binding posts would push it into the next bracket.

Both speakers offer coarse adjustments via toggle switches next to the speaker terminals. The Minor's toggle selects between 'normal', 'high' and 'low', for 1.5dB cut or boost of the woofer levels. This may sound like a trivial amount, but its usefulness in compensating for either live or slightly absorbent rooms cannot be undervalued.

The Major offers the same contour options, as well as a three-position switch for the mid/tweeter ribbon. The bass control boosts the woofer level by 2dB, for a warmer sound, or creates a 2dB cut for a tighter sound. As with the Minor, the dynamic properties change slightly, showing increases or decreases in the system's Q. The Major's treble control can be used to reduce the mid/treble output by 1dB or boost it by 1.5dB. I listened to both speakers with the controls at 'normal'.

MAJOR TO MIN
THE APOGEE CENTAURUS
Making in ribbon technology even more accessible, Apogee follows the Stage with two new models, Centaur Major and Minor . . .
by Ken Kessler
LOUDSPEAKERS
Sound quality
Conclusion

ABOVE: Original pages from the Jul '91 issue of *HFN* which saw Ken Kessler hands on with Apogee's hybrid ribbon Centaur speakers

BELOW: The three-strong Centaurus range with a pair of the flagship Major speakers (rear) flanked by the Centaur (left) and Minor (right)

CUT 'N' COVER

The Minor measures 100cm tall, 35cm wide and 22.5cm deep. We are talking *small*, so even if you do use them away from the wall – 18in is a sensible minimum – you're not looking at an overwhelming intrusion. Should you have to place them close to the back wall you may find yourself using the bass cut.

> 'They rewrite the rules of Apogee ownership'

The enclosure for the woofer is a sealed cabinet measuring 710x200x180mm (hwd), and it's not seen when you view the speaker from the front. The grilles are permanently fixed so all I can tell you about the 6.5in woofer is that it features a 1in voice coil and its cone is made of mineral-filled polypropylene, with a synthetic rubber surround. The Minor is finished in a dark grey paint which is not unlike 'Hammerite'.

While Apogee doesn't state the sensitivity, the Minor is a 6ohm (nominal) load, with a 4ohm minimum. A 50W/channel amplifier is recommended as the minimum, with 100W/ch maximum. And Apogee says that the Minor will deliver 107dB peaks at 4m using a 50W amplifier. In hands-on terms, I drove this to what I consider uncomfortable levels – 98dB at 1.5m – with a 35W/ch *valve* amp without detecting a trace of clipping from the amp or rasp from the speakers. And that's in a room with low ambient noise levels, so I'm talking *loud*. Frequency response, by the way, is stated as 40Hz-20kHz.

WEIGHT GAIN

The Major is another story entirely. In addition to an extra nine cycles down below, it seems more sensitive despite a minimum recommendation of 80W per channel (200W max). But it's a change in the sonic character in ⟳

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terms of greater weight at all levels rather than easier 'driveability' which creates this impression.

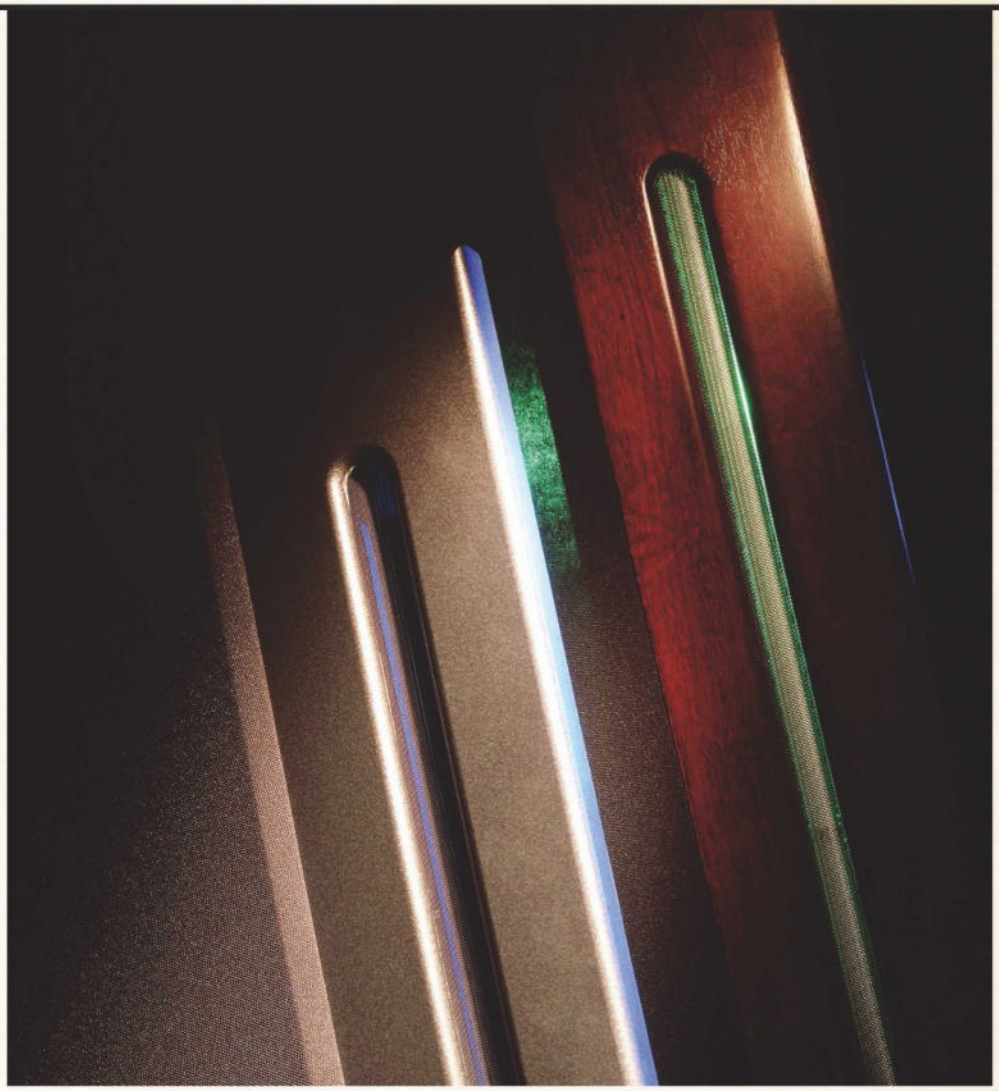
The Major is not for the space shy. Standing 163cm tall, with a 46cm wide frontal aspect and total depth of 30cm, the speaker is only slightly less imposing than a Duetta or a Diva. The standard finish is the same anthracite colour as that of the Minor, but the review pair arrived with the optional rosewood veneer and looked positively gorgeous.

FEELING FLUSH

As with the Minor, the woofer enclosure is not visible from the front. It measures 107cm tall, but – instead of a square cross section as in the Minor – it's 28cm deep, with a frontal width of 27cm and a back panel width of 20cm. In both cases, the woofer enclosures are rock solid and internally braced, while the shape of the Major's cabinet is intended to further reduce the effect of internal standing waves.

The Major, too, works best with a minimum of 18in clearance from the back wall, but you can just about get away with flush placement. With both speakers, fine-tuning involves the usual Apogee four-step, juggling tilt (using the screw-in spikes), toe-in, fore-and-aft placement and left/right positioning. What's important for those who might consider the Minor due to its suitability for small rooms is the optional stand, which adds a few inches to the height but adjusts the tilt for nearfield listening.

My main concern with these speakers involved the amplifier selection. Using the familiar battery of sources – Lyra Clavis cartridge, SME V/Oracle front end, and CAL and Marantz CD-12 CD players – I spent most of my time swapping amplifiers, trying hard to find one which *wouldn't* drive the Centaurs.



ABOVE: The Minor (left) in its Hammerite-like dark grey paint finish and the Major review sample in optional rosewood veneer. The Major was also available in walnut, mahogany and blonde oak finishes

LEFT: Apogee's 'full-range' Stage measured 950mm tall by 660mm at its widest point, the chassis itself being some 50mm thick. It cost £2350 per pair when launched in the UK in 1990

Let me tell you something else: *nobody* has heard what an Apogee can do unless they've used valves. And, as we all know, this has been denied us due to the hideously low impedances of the full-range models. A Croft Series 5, Radford STA-25, a 35W/channel from Woodside costing roughly the same as a pair of Minors and some 100W monoblocks from Ray Lumley, drove the Minor to adequate levels – and the Major.

DIVINE BY DESIGN

I'm not touting the Centaurs as having sensitivity in the Lowther/Klipsch region. A wonderful little tube/MOSFET hybrid (£1200 or so) had to work hard with the Minors, but – within reason – they *sounded* divine. The Series 5 struggled with the Majors, but handled the Minors with embarrassing ease. As for the rest of the amplifiers: no sweat. And while I would expect 200W/channel's worth of D'Agostino

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Delights to do marvellous things to the lower registers, the dynamics, headroom and the attack, I refuse to lose sight of the cost element.

So how do the Centaur speakers differ from the full-range specimens? In a word: punch. Played side by side with Divas or Stages, the Centaurs show you the difference between planar woofers and acoustic suspension cone woofers. The former are smooth, visceral, tangible. Despite the weight and extension, ribbon-derived bass is understated, almost incidental. Graft a cone onto a ribbon and you add greater slam, attack, presence.

The kick, especially from percussion and electric bass, will disarm any who have criticised full-range Apogees because they didn't like or comprehend the nature of ribbon bass. The benefits of a sane impedance, greater sensitivity and easier room matching are mere bonuses. In the sound stakes, it's a happy marriage for those who can't make the leap from dynamic woofer sound to planar bass.

SITTIN' PRETTY

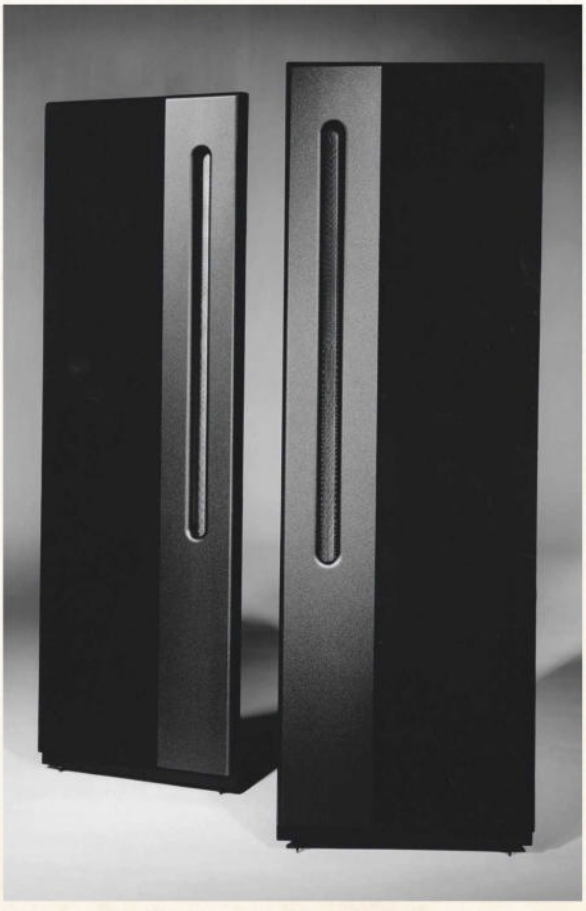
In a way, this undermines one consistent Apogee trait, that of refinement. It's like replacing the tyres on your Mercedes for low-profile road huggers. Sure, the grip improves, but you can definitely kiss the ride goodbye. The real magic, though, is in the blending. My favourite hybrids – the Celestion 1000s, MartinLogans and so on – work well because the designers knew how to segue two different technologies. Apogee took ten years from its inception before it felt that a ribbon/cone hybrid met its standards and the wait was worth it.

The trick, as Celestion found when crossing over at higher-than-expected frequencies, was to find a woofer as controlled, well-damped and fast as the ribbon element. Try though I did, I couldn't find anything which betrayed this miscegenation. Tough acoustic tracks, lots of solo recordings, all-brass ensembles – the sound was 'of a piece'. Using my current fave track, the peerless Ruth Brown performance of 'If I Can't Sell It, I'll Keep Sittin' On It', I tried to listen through the music for Minor or Major flaws (and to think I resisted the puns almost to the end), but both models said, 'No way, Jack, you're gonna listen to the *music*'. Which I most certainly did.

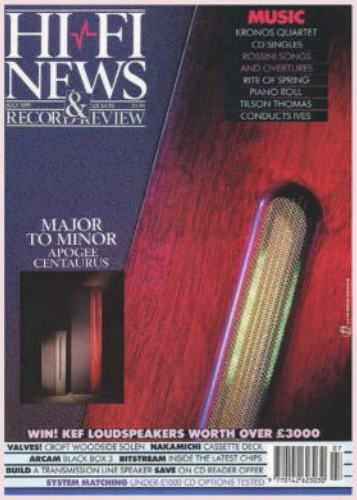
These speakers are like old friends. They have the familiar Apogee sweetness (here's where the transistors lose out to the tubes), palpable three-dimensionality, air, a sense of real space, image precision and midband warmth. Ruth Brown was in the room, swinging to beat the band.

> "'No way, Jack, you're gonna listen to the *music*"'

The Major is serious stuff, a true, high-end Apogee speaker but with bass you'd expect of an ATC monitor or other dynamic masterpiece. It will do justice to amps that come in crates. It paints a picture from wall to wall and floor to ceiling. But the Minor is even more satisfying as it costs less than a third of the price and will work in tiny rooms. What you give up is barely significant when you factor in budget and space. And that makes it even more of an achievement.



BELOW: The Centaurus Centaur stood 117cm tall and, like the Major and Minor, used Kapton-backed Apogee type ribbons with high-energy strontium ferrite ceramic magnets. The grilles were permanently fixed on all models



Also in *HFN* this month in 1991

DOWN THE LINE
Build Richard McDonald's transmission line speaker.

STARTING POINT
Martin Colloms looks for the best CD-based combinations up to £1000 in tests with products from Aura, Epos, Heybrook, KEF, Marantz, Mission, Philips, Pioneer, Rogers and Rotel.

NAKAMICHI CASSETTE DECK 2
Tested by Chris Bryant.

A LOT OF BOTTLE
Ken Kessler on amplifiers from Woodside, Solen and Croft.

BLACK BOX 3
Paul Miller tests Arcam's bitstream converter.

MAGNEPLANAR 2.6
Floorstanding loudspeaker reviewed by Steve Harris.

AFFORDABLE ALCHEMY
Ken Kessler hears a US-made value-for-money D/A unit.

HARBETH P3
Trevor Butler takes stock of Harbeth's new miniature. Is it better than the LS3/5A?

POT POURRI
Ken Kessler on Audio-Technica's AT-OC30 cartridge and Martin Colloms looks at MUSICAM.

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PMC twenty5.26i loudspeakers, gloss black, three years old, mint condition with original boxes, £5500 ono. Email: jdsnell@hotmail.co.uk. Tel: 07555 950223

9. TURNTABLES

PRO-JECT X1 with Ortofon Quintet Blue cartridge, good condition, £200. Lehmannaudio Black Cube SE preamp, good condition, £200. Tel: 07375 111135

KISEKI Blue NS cartridge. Excellent condition, about 30 hours' use only. Wooden box and stylus guard, owned from new, about two years old. Can post. £1100 or good offer. Tel: 07768 582208. Email: gravissima64@outlook.com

PRO-JECT Xtension 10, olive finish, carbon tonearm (no cart). Excellent condition, complete with all accessories and wooden crate. Little use, two-years old, sale will include Chord SignatureX Tuned ARAY cable (£1000). Total new £4295. Nearest offers around £2400. Can deliver locally. Tel: 07507 681433

KOETSU Urushi Wajima. Perfect condition, boxed, 35 hours' use only. Can demonstrate. Photos, *etc*, on request. £2600. Tel: 07592 125431. Email: neilpage37@yahoo.com

GARRARD 301 turntable, Maxiplank plinth. Nottingham Analogue 12in Anna arm, £2200. Croft Micro preamp, £550. Croft Series 7R power amplifier, £750. Posselt Albatross speakers, £500. Spendor SP2 speakers and Target stands, £550. Musical Fidelity X-CAN valve headphone amplifier, £120. Sensible offers considered. Tel: 07376 658536

LINN LP12, custom black plinth and lid, Valhalla power supply with updates, Ittok LVII with van den Hul cables, new K18 just fitted (09/23), new spare stylus, 45rpm adapter, couple of plinth chips, few lid scratches, but generally very nice condition. Consider cheaper (£100/£150) turntable. £1550. Tel: 07785 747366

11. SYSTEMS

NAIM Uniti 2, boxed, £1500, PMC twenty.23, piano black, boxed, with Chord Odyssey cables, £1050. REL T/9i sub, piano black, £450. Complete system £2500. Collect Purley in Surrey. Tel: 07974 021109

KUZMA Stabi S turntable with Stogi tonearm complete with Benz MC Ace SL cartridge (ten hours' use), £1950, boxed. Yarland Model FV-34B valve amplifier with Russ Andrews power cable, remote control, £400, boxed. LFD MC phono amplifier plus power supply, £650. Two Cabasse Farella 400 Mark 2 speakers with mini glass stands (Stands Unique), two 3m Atlas Hyper 2 cables, £400, boxed. All in mint condition, photos available. Collection from Stafford. Tel: 078133 75930. Email: wood.john007@btinternet.com

MARANTZ CD7, immaculate, boxed, £2100. Primaire 30.1 amp, immaculate, £350. Chario Academy Millennium 2 speakers, immaculate, boxed, £700. Tel: 07837 011678

ROKSAN Caspian M2 amplifier with remote control. £900. Arcam SACD player, £350. Rega RX5 floorstanders, £350. Acoustic Solutions SP 111 DAB tuner £100. Collection from Helensburgh. Boxes available. Can demonstrate. Tel: 014366 72038

12. MISCELLANEOUS

JECKLIN Float Model Two. Original box, decayed foam removed but not yet replaced. £50 or best offer. Tel: 07702 737337. Email: richard@machinaloci.com.

HEXMAT Yellow Bird Phono Record Isolator Mat, £70 plus p&p (£124.99 new). Six months old. Reason for selling is that I have upgraded to the Eclipse. Email: michael.bickley@hotmail.co.uk

HI-FI News, 88 copies from Sept 1965 to July 1973, almost complete, plus eight assorted copies between Jan 1974 and Nov 1991. All shelved vertically and from a smoke-free house. £350. Tel: 01590 670813

13. WANTED

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AUDIO Innovations valve amplifier (integrated). Email: jonnypcocking@gmail.com

HI-FI Choice magazine, the 1986 The Collection issue. Contact Jim. Email: jr812@hotmail.com

CELESTION Kingston loudspeakers. Will pay up to £5000. Tel: 01890 840645

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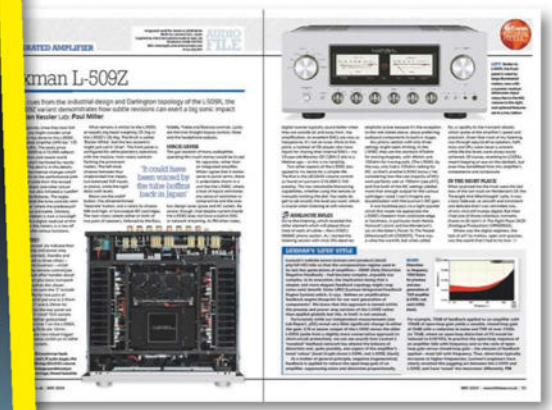

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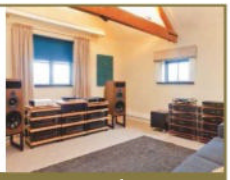

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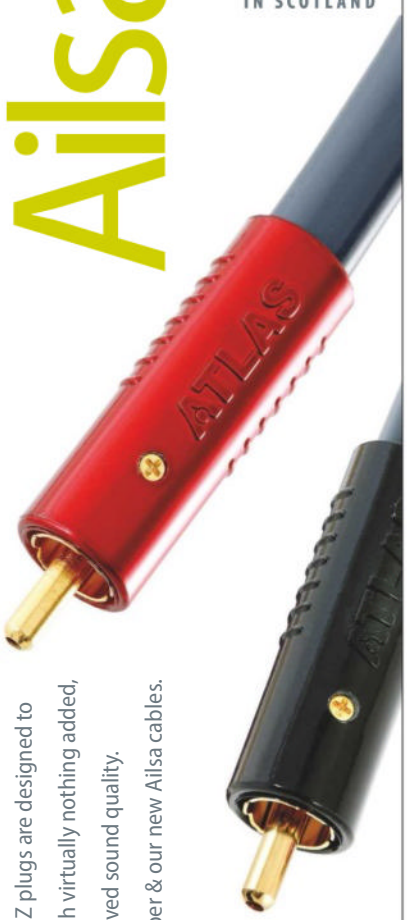

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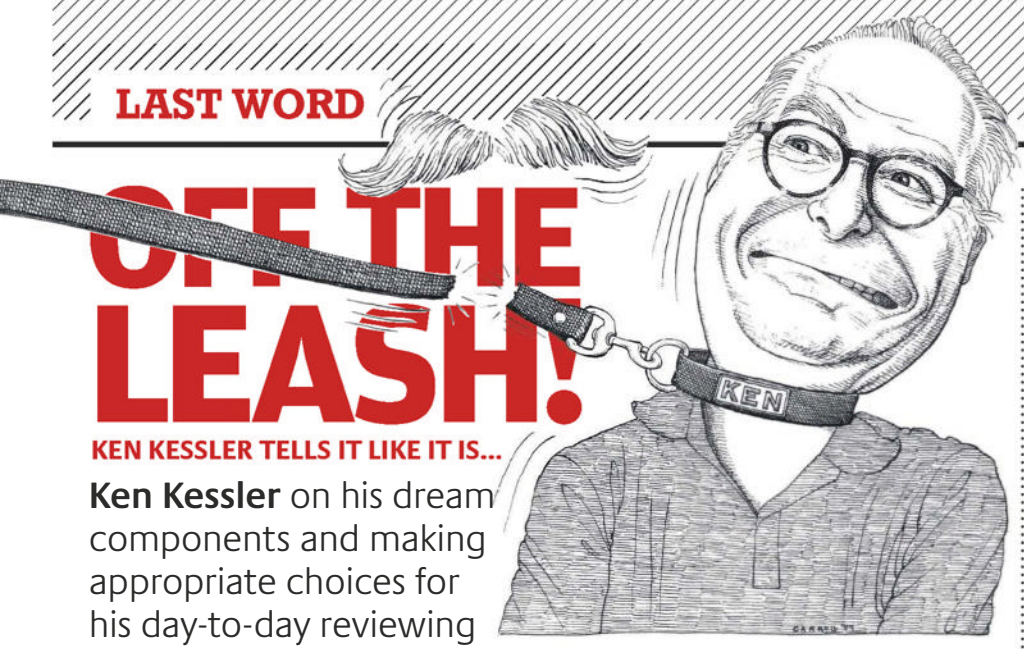

KEN KESSLER TELLS IT LIKE IT IS...

Ken Kessler on his dream components and making appropriate choices for his day-to-day reviewing

While there are hi-fi reviewers around the world with TechDAS Air Force Zeros, OMA decks, or Wilson Chronosonic XVXs, I'm not one of them. Even if I had the dosh, I simply don't have space for, say, speakers larger than those with a 15x20in footprint.

And no, I am not envious of those with far dearer components – I appreciate that I have a stunner of a system by any standards, but that's because hi-fi classifies as a business expense, and so my purchases are justified on a professional/working level.

LUCKY LISTENER

That said, I am one of the few lucky ones whose occupation happens to be one of his passions. For health reasons, thankfully I never succumbed to the faint lure of being a restaurant critic. I am fat enough without that. But before you ask, yes, hi-fi journalists do have the occasional perk of accommodation pricing just as every other job has its benefits. I don't begrudge a plumber getting a boiler at cost nor do I expect my dentist to pay what I must should she need a crown. So let's get past it: if this were a gardening magazine, I wouldn't be paying full retail for a hoe.

I think perhaps that I have purchased all the elements of my final reference system. My choice of PS Audio DirectStream DAC MK2 [p48] and matching PerfectWave SACD Transport is positively 'bargain basement' compared to offerings from dCS, Esoteric and other cost-no-object digital manufacturers. Here the Law of Diminishing Returns is rather soothing given that I'd have to spend a fortune to better my PS Audio pairing, which does everything I need *vis-à-vis* CD and SACD.

I have also completed a cluster of loudspeakers at various price points so that I can review products in proper context. From the Quad S1s at entry level (my sub-£1000-per-pair go-to speaker) to Wilson Sasha DAWs [*HFN* Mar '19] for high-end hardware, I can pretty much cover everything. In between are a half-dozen speakers at suitable price intervals, enabling me to assemble systems of similar cost levels to match to any amplifiers, preamplifiers or source components I might get for review.

For me, this is the key to balanced reviewing, creating the appropriate context for someone considering, say, a £1500 integrated amp: he or she would not be using it with a £100,000 speaker. Despite the widespread acceptance of a certain philosophy propounded in the 1970s and '80s, when allegedly responsible dealers were selling Linn LP12s to go with NAD 3020 amps and £200 two-way speakers, I resolutely cannot believe it makes any sense to support such an imbalance.

> 'This must be the key to balanced reviewing'

What they never told the customers was that, while saving to upgrade the rest of the system to match the Linn, they would be listening to £200 speakers maybe for years.

So I would never review, for example, a £700 turntable through a £16,000 preamp, or put an £89 MM cartridge in a £14,000 tonearm. Those who *do* that would say it gives the products the optimum conditions to see what they can do. But the reality is that they would never be used that way. It's far more useful if they'd stick that £89 cartridge in the £700 turntable.

DREAMING ON

Another concern for any writer with a grasp of reality is the need to keep systems that are relevant to today's market for the review to have any relevance. For instance, readers might wish to assess the review item in a store against other contemporary components. With this in mind, I cannot possibly listen solely with my 35-year-old Marantz CD12/DA12 CD player, or just with open-reel tapes. When forming my opinion, even if not specified in the reviews, I have to employ equipment that's either in current production or only recently discontinued.

Despite a steady flow of new products to savour every month, I am still a hardcore enthusiast who plays 'fantasy hi-fi' in the way all audiophiles of limited means aspire to systems they'll never afford. As I have written here before, my vintage Bucket List dreams remain a Crown 800 Series reel-to-reel deck and an Empire Troubadour 598 Mk II or 698 turntable. And I miss the Apogee Scintillas, the Zeta and Infinity Black Widow tonearms – and I wouldn't say 'No' to a Nakamichi Dragon or Stax ELS-F81 electrostatics.

But if asked what I would buy if, all of a sudden, everything I owned disappeared? And I also happened to win the lottery? As it stands, a number of pieces I already own would remain, for example the Graham tonearm, or the Audio Research REF 6SE preamp which does absolutely everything I need and has enough inputs to handle everything I want to feed it.

So to what components do I still aspire? Precious few, though I have always dreamed of owning Klipsch Heresy speakers, and I lust after Air Tight and Luxman valve gear. That's pretty much it. Never thought I would have such simple tastes...

Jun issue on sale 3rd MAY

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- D'Agostino Relentless 800 monoblocks
- Burmester B38 floorstanders
- Dethonray Listening M1 DAC/headphone amp
- JBL CD350/SA550 CD/amplifier combination
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Demonstration Day for PS Audio Aspen FR10 Loudspeakers

In response to many requests at last year's UK Hifi Show at Ascot, **Signature Audio Systems would like to invite you to a free open door demonstration of PS Audio's Aspen FR10 loudspeakers on Saturday 18th May at the Donnington Manor Hotel, Dunton Green, Sevenoaks, TN13 2TD.** You are welcome to join us from 10am - 6pm to experience the FR10s in a moderately priced system. We will be using CD, Streaming and Vinyl playpack. Feel free to attend with your own music choices in CD/Vinyl. We'll provide drinks and nibbles free of charge, all you need to do is contact us to confirm your interest (see contact details below).

"Setting the £10k standard" says Hifi News who also awarded the Aspen FR10s with an "Outstanding Product Award" mirroring the awards for the Aspen FR30 & FR20 loudspeakers. Adam Smith (Hifi News) said "the FR10s reward handsomely, offering a scale & level of authority that belies their compact dimensions."

FR20

Come and enjoy an informal & laid back demonstration of these groundbreaking loudspeakers from PS Audio on Saturday 18th May, easy access with free parking, very close to Sevenoaks in Kent. This is your opportunity to get up close and personal with PS Audio's Aspen FR10 loudspeakers.

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FR30

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